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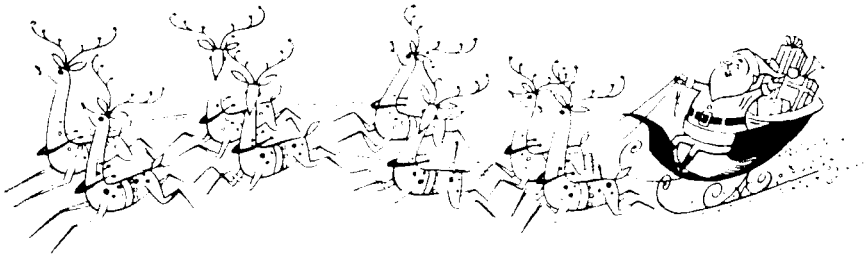

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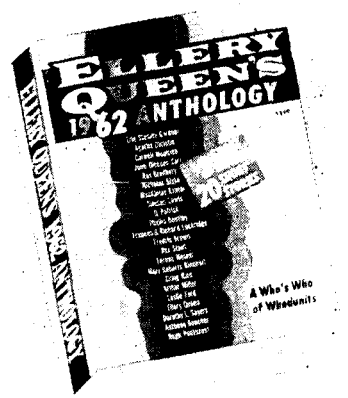

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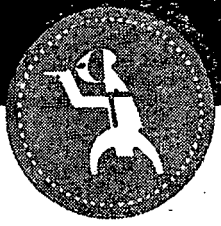

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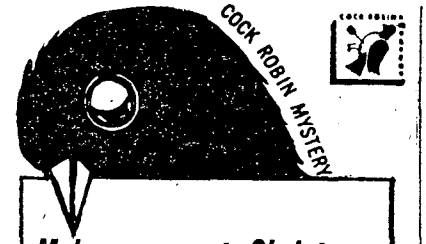

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We are happy to welcome William P. McGivern in his first appearance in EQMM—with a sensitive and suspenseful story of the relationship between a father and son, and what happens to them when unexpected danger and cruelty and violence burst into their lives . . .

Most of you will undoubtedly be familiar with Mr. McGivern's novels. His first book, DEATH RUNS FASTER, *won a Red Badge Award at Dodd, Mead; and since then have come such fine mysteries as* SHIELD FOR MURDER, THE CROOKED FRAME, THE BIG HEAT, ROGUE COP, MARGIN OF TERROR, *and more recently,* THE SEVEN FILE *and* ODDS AGAINST TOMORROW. *His two latest novels (as of the time of this writing) have been departures from mystery and suspense—*SAVAGE STREETS, *the probing of a modern American suburban community, and* SEVEN LIES SOUTH, *the story of an American drifter in Spain who becomes the pawn in an international conspiracy.*

We sincerely hope to have more of Mr. McGivern's work in future issues of EQMM.

ORDEAL IN DARKNESS

by WILLIAM P. McGIVERN

"ARE YOU SURE YOU'LL BE ALL right?" John Miller's wife asked him, as she swung a tweed coat around her shoulders.

"Yes, of course," he said. "Johnny and I will be fine. Give your mother my best. And tell her she wouldn't have these fainting spells if she knocked off about ten pounds."

"You know she tries."

"Sure she does. So put it tactfully: tell her if she lost ten pounds the Hollywood scouts would be after her."

"I really hate to leave you."

"Now stop it, honey." John Miller got to his feet and reached out to find the mantlepiece with his left hand. Orienting himself, he turned in his wife's direction. He was a tall, powerfully built man with thick black hair, and a long jaw that jutted out at problems and troubles with the authority of a battering ram. "I can take care of myself and Johnny for an hour or so." There was a trace of irritation in his voice. "I'm not a helpless invalid."

He heard the click of her high heels on the bare pine flooring of the living room. She stopped in front of him, so close that he could

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smell the light fragrance of her hair. "If Mother weren't such a twitching bundle of nerves I wouldn't leave you," she said. "But you know how she is."

"She's frightened," he said reasonably. "It's perfectly understandable. Pain in the chest, a little trouble breathing—and her imagination goes into high gear. The doctor will be there before you. He'll give her a sedative, and her maid will spend the night with her. You hold her hand and comfort her till she falls asleep. Meanwhile, Johnny and I will have our dinner, and enjoy a little bachelor peace and quiet. So why are you worried?"

"I don't want to leave you. I want to take care of you. Isn't that natural?"

He could imagine her small serious face, the forehead anxious beneath the loose blonde hair, and the lines of tension beside her long, full lips. "It's natural enough, I suppose," he said, "providing the man in question wants to be coddled like a baby. But would you like being married to a baby?"

She slipped her arms around his neck and held herself tightly against him. "No," she said quietly. "But sometimes I wish you—well, needed me more."

He rubbed his big hand up and down her back. "Don't talk nonsense," he said. "I need you. You know that."

"Yes, I know," she said, and sighed faintly.

"Where's Johnny?"

"He hiked up to the top of the meadow with Baron. I'll honk for him at the end of the drive, and send him in. You have Mother's number if you need me."

"You'd think you were heading for outer space. For the last time, please stop worrying. We can hold the fort till you get back."

When his wife had gone, John Miller settled himself in the deep chair before the fireplace and lit a cigarette. He made sure the match was extinguished before placing it in the ashtray. Then he touched the broad bandage that covered his eyes, adjusting it slightly with his fingertips.

For eight days now John Miller had lived in darkness: a freak explosion had occurred in the laboratory of the firm he worked for in Porchester, and a sheet of burning chemicals had been shot into his eyes. But fortunately, even in that instant of pain and shock, his instincts had responded with automatic speed and competence; while an assistant shouted for help, and a female lab technician screamed pointlessly in the confusion, John Miller had groped his way to a hand basin and splashed warm water into his stinging eyes. He was still bathing them coolly and efficiently when someone had taken his arm and led him away from the fire.

The swift action had saved his sight. The doctors had told him as

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much. In another week the bandages would come off, the thick medications swabbed from his eyes, and he would see as well as he had before the accident. John Miller believed the doctors. He saw no point in borrowing trouble.

Now he stretched his legs out comfortably and relaxed in the chair. He heard the sound of his wife's car going up the driveway, and heard her honk for Johnny, the sound faint and lonesome in the silence. The boy would be along soon.

Miller frowned faintly as he thought of his wife's anxiety at leaving him. Madge puzzled him at times. He was a man who valued freedom and independence, and he didn't understand why she couldn't accept that. Given her way she would have trapped him with soft maternal comforts—breakfast in bed in the morning, pipe and slippers at night, each administered with consoling clucks for the weary warrior.

But Miller fought stubbornly against these comfortable surrenders. He liked to be up early, showered and shaved, attacking the new day cleanly and sharply. This routine had been drilled into him in his father's home; at breakfast there were scrubbed faces, serious prayers, then oatmeal and off to school. Pride had been part of his growth, but not vanity.

And what was wrong with this? he wondered now. He didn't need or want help from anyone. This was essential to his definition of manhood—pride in your freedom and strength, pride in your responsibilities, pride in shouldering your burdens without help and carrying them without whines or complaints.

Miller had moved twenty miles from Porchester because he valued the independence and challenges of rural life. The Miller farm was three miles from the main highway, two miles from the nearest neighbor; it was a tiny, sovereign kingdom which he ruled without the help of friends, neighbors, or of government assistance. He didn't find the problems of country life synthetic or irrelevant; in the Twentieth Century this was about the only way he knew of to pit his strength and intelligence against the challenge of a stern environment.

His tractor was equipped with a snow blade, and no storm had yet kept him from reaching his office on time. He had cruised his own stand of timber, marking those trees which would mature into a salable wood crop, and clearing out the rest for firewood. The old stone farmhouse had five fireplaces, and Miller cut all his own kindling and logs, working in the spring and summer with a power saw to store up his winter's supply before the first frost touched the meadow. A generator secured them against power failures, and the freezer held four months' food.

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And what was wrong with all this? he wondered again. Why didn't Madge understand that he simply liked being independent, free to stand on his own two feet? The reflection reminded him of his farm pond. He had built it himself, scrooping out the bowl with a rented bulldozer, and putting in a pier with pilings from an old rotting barn he had pulled down. He had done the whole thing himself, competently and cheerfully, but Madge had fussed at him for not letting the state conservation agent help him with the job. She had been worried about, of all things, the man's feelings. "He's paid to advise and help you," she had said. "And he's so eager to earn his money. Why don't you let him?"

She simply didn't understand, he decided. But he hadn't been completely successful with the pond, he thought, smiling ruefully. Muskrats had dug holes in the bank near the pier, and so far they had fought him to a standstill. He had tried shooting them, trapping them, and poisoning them; he had even piped the exhaust fumes from the tractor into their holes, but the smooth little devils had gone on burrowing and multiplying until now, under a hard crust of snow, certain areas of the bank were as treacherous as mantraps. And Madge, for some idiotic reason, pretended to find this very funny. She was on the side of the muskrats, it seemed.

He heard their German Shepherd barking. The sound told him that Johnny was chaining Baron to the doghouse beside the parking area; the barks were a croon of piteous disappointment. Soon the front door opened and closed, and Johnny's light footsteps sounded in the room.

"Hi, dad," he said. "You okay?"

"Yes, of course. How was your hike?"

"Great. Baron kicked up a couple of pheasants down near the pond. He was just as surprised as they were. Look, dad, can't we talk over this shotgun business again? I mean, just talk about it?"

"We've talked about it once, and I think that's enough," Miller said. Johnny was twelve—too young for a gun, Miller had decided. "You didn't go down to the pond, did you?"

"No." Johnny's tone was subdued. "I wouldn't go there without you."

"Good boy. I'm glad you remembered that. It's a dangerous place for a youngster. Now, how do you feel about dinner?"

"Gee, dad, I know you won't let me—but can I fix dinner? And bring it in here to you on a tray? Please?"

Miller smiled as he stood up. This was his mother's child, no doubt of that—eager and high-strung, changeable as mercury, with expressions that could flit like quicksilver across his sharp and

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delicate little face. He placed his hands on the boy's thin shoulders. "If you know I won't let you do something, why do you bother asking me?"

"I don't know. It's like buying a sweepstakes ticket, I guess. There's always a chance."

Miller was surprised into laughter; this was Madge's kind of humor, oblique and wry, and it always caught him off balance. It charmed him because he couldn't quite analyze it; when he attempted to take it apart with his trusted tools of definition and modification, the essence of the joke always slipped through his fingers.

"Now listen a minute," he said, and held the boy close to him. "I don't forbid you to do things just for the fun of it. But I don't want you tackling jobs you can't handle. When you're ready you'll get a green light *and* my blessing. Fair enough?"

"But how can you be sure if I'm ready? Or if I'm not?"

"You'll just have to take my word for it," Miller said. "Now come on. Your mother left a casserole on the stove. We'll heat that, and I'll make a salad while you set the table. For dessert I've got something special in mind—gingerbread with whipped cream. How does that sound?"

"How can you do all that? Without being able to see."

"You watch. I built every cabinet in the kitchen myself."

Three steps led from the living room into the large foyer of the house. Miller descended them confidently and walked down the hall to the dining room, counting off fifteen strides under his breath. Then he turned left and headed for the kitchen, with thirteen additional strides bringing him abreast of the lights switch next to the range.

He had stepped off distances the first day of his temporary blindness, and now he could navigate with assurance in any area of the house. Testing his calculations, he stretched his hand toward the wall. He hit it on the nose. The metal plate of the light switch was smooth and cool under his fingers.

"Hey, that's some trick," Johnny said.

"No trick, just a little planning."

It was then—as Miller was reaching for the door of the refrigerator—that Baron began to bark.

Miller hesitated, then turned his head in the direction of the dog's furious roars. "He's on his chain?" he asked casually—but unnecessarily, he knew.

"I guess he wants to come in. Want me to get him?"

"Never mind."

Johnny collected plates and silverware and walked into the dining room.

Miller hadn't moved. He stood with a hand on the door of the refrigerator, his head still turned toward the sound of the barking.

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"What time is it?" he asked, when Johnny returned.

"Almost six, dad."

"How dark is it?"

"Well, there's still a little light. Why?"

Miller didn't answer. Baron's barking told him two things: the dog was aroused but was only puzzled. He was challenging something which confused him. Baron was intelligent, and Miller had schooled him carefully and patiently; he had no use for ill-mannered dogs and less for their owners, and he also knew the folly of allowing a German Shepherd to mature without providing foolproof curbs for its strength and instincts.

What was bothering the dog now?

"Johnny, we may have some guests," he said. "Are the lights on in the foyer?"

"Who'd come by at supper-time?"

"I don't know." Miller's voice sharpened. "How about the lights?"

"They're on. What's the matter?"

It was unfortunate. There were large uncurtained windows in the foyer. Anyone outside could see into that area of the house. If the lights were out they would be less vulnerable . . . Then he felt a twist of irritation at himself. He was behaving like a silly old maid, imagining burglars and prowlers at every creak of the floorboards.

"Let's take a look," he said. "It might be somebody who's lost."

Miller put a hand on the boy's shoulder, and they crossed the dining room and turned into the hallway leading to the foyer. But before they came to the lighted foyer, Miller checked the boy with his hand. Now they stood in the shadows of the hallway, hidden from anyone who might be approaching the front door. But Johnny should be able to see the parking lot. Baron was still barking furiously.

"There's a car in the lot," Johnny said cheerfully. "Looks like an old Buick. Want me to go see what they want?"

As Johnny started forward, Miller tightened the grip on his shoulder. "Who's in the car?"

"Two men, that's all. I can just see their faces through the windshield. One is smoking—I can see the tip of his cigarette flare up when he takes a puff. It's like a lighthouse beacon—it glows real bright for a second, then fades away."

"How dark is it?"

"Let's see." Johnny's tone was judicious. "Well, if I asked you to go out and play you'd say it was too dark. I can see the driveway up to the first turn, and about halfway down the meadow. But where the apple trees are it's black as pitch. Why don't you want me to go out and see what they want?"

"I imagine they'll let us know," Miller said.

He would have felt more comfortable with Baron inside—the

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dog was no use to them chained up. But Baron had done all he could under the circumstances—challenged the intruders, alerted his master. Now it was up to Miller himself.

Johnny had moved closer to him. "How come they're just sitting there, dad?"

"I don't know, son." Miller's car was in Porchester, and he tried to guess what these men would deduce from the empty parking lot, the lighted foyer, a barking dog. They would probably assume no one was home. So what *were* they waiting for?

Someone to return so that they could ask for directions or the use of the phone? This was a wishful idea, Miller knew; if they needed directions or a phone they would have driven down to the next farm. They couldn't know when the family would return to this presumably empty house. It might be hours . . .

"Dad, they're getting out!" Johnny's voice rose with excitement. "You want me to go to the door?"

"Hold on! What do they look like?"

"One is real big, and he's wearing an overcoat and no hat. I can just make out his face. It's big too, long and wide. The other one is smaller. He's got on a jacket and a cap. I can't see his face at all. He's thin and snaky, if you know what I mean. They're both kind of spooky—like they're actors on a dark stage, in a bedroom maybe, waiting for an innocent girl to turn on the lights and start screaming. Remember when we did that play at school?"

"Yes," Miller said, and tried to control his nervous irritation. Johnny's eyes always charged the commonplace with drama. This was something Miller didn't understand—Johnny's theatrical imagination, his fascination for masks and magic and charades, the happy delight with which the boy slipped into a land of make-believe with Madge; they constantly mystified him with improvised playlets, absurd burlesques of TV plots, and flights of fancy which couldn't be charted by the rules or laws of his own precise mental empire.

"What are they doing now?" he asked sharply.

"The big man is standing by the car looking over at Baron. The other one is walking across the lawn."

"Coming toward the front door?"

"No, now he's standing on the lawn facing it. But he's outside the light that's coming through the windows of the foyer. You know what I mean? I can just see his shoes. They're boots, really—black boots with bright buckles just above his ankles. Real cool."

"And the big man?"

"He's still standing by the car. It's too dark now to see his face. Wait! The little man is starting to-

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ward the front door—I can see more of him with each step, his legs, his hands . . ." Johnny's body stiffened as if an electric charge had gone through it, and his voice suddenly rose. "He's got a gun, daddy—he's got a gun in his hand!"

"Quiet!" Miller clapped a hand over his son's mouth. "Keep still."

He spoke sharply and confidently, but his heart was pounding waves of fear through his body. He tried frantically to think; the telephone was in the living room but the man would see him if he tried to grope his way across the foyer. There was no time to reach his bedroom where he had a gun. And he couldn't see to shoot, in any case.

For an instant Miller thought of ripping off the bandage, pawing the thick medication from his eyes—but he knew at once this would be futile; shock had caused his optic nerves to recoil into protective blindness. With or without the blindfolding bandage, his sight was gone.

"The back door," he said, whispering urgently into Johnny's ear. "We've got to get out."

"I'm scared, dad." The boy's voice was almost a whimper.

"Do as I say. We'll get to the woods and make for your hideout."

"We can't, dad, we can't!"

Miller shook him roughly. "Damn it, boy, move!" He swung his son around and pushed him back toward the dining room. They went swiftly to the kitchen, Miller's hands tight on Johnny's thin shoulders. "Open the door," he said. "Quick."

"I'm scared, dad. Please—I can't help it."

Miller groped for the doorknob. He couldn't panic—that was the one thought he must cling to. Keep thinking, try to use your wits. He debated—for a single heartbeat—turning off the kitchen light. No—the men thought the house was empty. Snapping off a light would tell them otherwise.

Suddenly he felt cold air blowing against the backs of his legs. The draft was behind him—coming from the foyer. The front door had been opened.

A voice sounded. "Hey! Anybody home?" It was a high, twanging voice, deliberate and drawling, and to Miller it seemed threaded with a note of mocking challenge.

He pushed his son through the back door. "Run!" he said in a savage whisper. "To the hideout."

Footsteps sounded behind him in the house, rapping sharply down the hallway toward the dining room. From the parking lot a voice rose above the noise of Baron's barking. "Hey, Corby? Anybody inside?"

The man in the house shouted back, "Somebody's just gone out the back door, Bill. Head 'em off."

But by then Miller and his son

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were plunging down the narrow lane which twisted into the woods behind the house. A wind was rising in the trees, and the limbs creaked under its buffeting attack. The night was bitterly cold, with last week's snow forming a thin crust over rock-hard ground.

From behind Miller could hear the men yelling to each other, their voices charged with tension and excitement. He tried to fix their relative positions in his mind: the big man—Bill—was rounding the parking lot and heading to the back of the house, and the other one—Corby—was coming out the kitchen door. The two men would meet in the semicircle of light falling from the kitchen windows.

"Let's get 'em, Bill." It was Corby shouting, a little frantically. "I seen two of 'em before they slipped down the road—a man and a boy. I got a big bullet for him and a little one for the kid. Let's go!"

"Put that gun away!" Bill's voice was harsher, rougher, older. There won't be no more shooting tonight. Come on. I got a flashlight."

The lane twisting into the woods was as familiar to Miller as the lines in his hands, but the ground was hard as iron now and had been sharply ridged by the big tire-treads of his tractor. This was an area of timber he was presently thinning out, hacking away honeysuckle vines and thorn bushes to give the trees room to grow in.

Ahead of him straddling the narrow road, were the stout wooden frames he used as support when he was cutting up fireplace logs. The rig, which Miller had fitted with vises and pulleys, was portable; he had moved it to this location two days before his accident, and he was afraid Johnny might not remember that it was directly in their path.

"Cut left," he said. He was gripping the boy's shoulders, pushing him on. "The sawhorses—watch out for them!"

They werved to the left, and a thin dry limb cut cruelly across Miller's mouth. He felt the warm blood instantly on his lips.

"We passed them," Johnny gasped faintly.

Ahead now, and to their right, was a deep scar in the earth—a huge long pit with banks running steeply down from the narrow road. This was Miller's goal. The pit had been dug decades ago when the farm had been mined for mica. Now the bottom of the pit was choked with weeds and fallen trees, and its sides overgrown with wild rose—thick, rank bramble, looped and interlocked over the years, with branches as thick as the butt of a pool cue, so that now the gnarled, thorny hedges were as impassable as barriers of barbed wire.

It was here that Miller hoped to go to ground—in a cave which Johnny had dug for himself under a huge, wild rosebush. The hideout had a concealed entrance and a tun-

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nel which twisted down to a small clearing thirty feet below the rim of the mica pit. Here they would be safe; even with flashlights the men could never find the entrance to the cave or follow the twisting turns of the tunnel.

Suddenly Miller's ankle twisted on a ridge of frozen earth and he pitched forward, crashing full-length against the ground. His hands lost Johnny. He lay stunned and helpless, fighting for breath. Behind him—closing in—he could hear the men's voices.

"Take it easy, Corby. They can't get away."

"They're trying to get help. We got to stop 'em."

"Ain't no help in these woods. Keep moving nice and slow. We'll hear 'em if they start running."

"Johnny!" Miller whispered the word, his voice trembling with pain. "Johnny?"

"I'm here, dad."

"Run!" he said. "Run, you little fool. To the hideout."

"No! I can't."

Miller worked himself to his knees and groped for the boy. He found his arm, then moved his hands to his shoulders. "Help me," he said, and lurched to his feet, using his son's frail body as a crutch. "Move! We've got to keep moving."

The hideout was about fifty feet ahead of them, and the two men pursing them were about the same distance behind; but the wind was an ally now, for it smothered the noise of their progress. In spite of the cold, sweat was running down Miller's body, plastering his shirt against his heaving chest; but it wasn't exertion pumping the perspiration—it was the nauseating pain exploding in his leg every time his weight sagged down on the torn ligaments in his ankle.

"Here, dad!" Johnny cried softly.

They went down on their hands and knees then, clawing their way into the thick branches of the rose-bush. The thorns ripped at Miller's face and scraped his arms and back like the teeth of a fine saw. He could feel the blood warm on his skin, and the sudden sting of his sweat in the fresh cuts.

The tunnel turned three times, forming a serpentine passage to the bottom of the mica pit. They completed the last leg on their stomachs, inching themselves down the narrow choked corridor, fingers scratching desperately at the frozen ground. In the cave Miller sat up and pulled his son into his arms, holding the small, cold face tightly against his chest.

The men stopped directly over them, on the edge of the mica pit. Miller could hear their voices twenty feet above his head.

"Where in hell did they go, Bill?"

"Keep quiet. They're close by—we'll hear 'em when they move."

The men said nothing for a few moments, but Miller could hear a faint crackling as they shifted their weight on the dry twigs.

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Corby broke the silence. "Damn, it's cold."

"Shut up! Keep listening."

"I don't like it out here. Woods at night give me the creeps."

"I don't like it either. I'd like a nice warm steak house and a couple of shots of rye to build up a head of steam with. But that's got to wait till we catch this pair." Suddenly the big man laughed, and it was a harsh, ugly sound in Miller's straining ears. "I bet they're listening," he said. "They disappeared somewhere around this big bush. They got to be near." He raised his voice. "Hey, mister! You hear me?"

Miller held Johnny close to him; he could feel the frantic stroke of the boy's heart against his body.

Corby was laughing softly. "How about if I spray some bullets around?"

"That's the only idea you got in that peanut brain of yours." The big man's voice was rough with contempt. "Pull out a rod and start shooting."

"My peanut brain. Who got us into this?"

"That don't matter. We're in it. The trick is to get out." He raised his voice. "Okay, mister, be smart. You and the kid are in your shirt sleeves. I saw that much. You can't last long in this cold—you'll freeze. So let's all of us go back to the house where it's nice and warm."

Miller touched his son's lips with his finger, warningly.

Again the two men above were silent. Then Bill shouted, "You ain't going to outsmart us. When you move we'll hear you. And then you're going to get it, right in your stupid heads."

Corby laughed again, and there was something sick and evil in the sound of it—a suggestion of furtive needs and desires, of pleasures to be relished in dark and secret places. "I been thinking," he said. "How come the guy and kid are here alone? The car's gone. So what about Mommy? When do you suppose she'll be coming back?"

Miller felt his son stiffen.

"That's something to think about," Bill said.

Now Corby raised his voice, shouting exultantly into the darkness. "Where's Mommy, mister? Some surprise she's going to get when she comes back, eh?"

"But we wouldn't hurt her," Bill said. "Listen, mister, we're in a jam. We need a car and somebody to drive it for us. About an hour ago we stuck up a hick bank in Royalsville, but an old coot of a cop shot up one of our tires as we was barreling out of town. We fixed him don't worry—Corby's good at fixing people—but by the time we got another heap, the State troopers had road-blocks up on Merchants Highway. So we had to swing up into the back country and we ain't leaving until we get a different car and a nice, innocent-looking chauffeur."

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Corby laughed again. "Mommy might do just fine."

How long had she been gone? Miller wondered. Fifteen or twenty minutes—not much longer. She wouldn't be in Porchester for another ten minutes. He prayed for delay—a flat tire, empty gas tank, complications at her mother's apartment. The doctor might want to move the old lady to a hospital. Madge might have to spend the night.

He prayed for anything that would keep her from walking into the hands of these men; he prayed to God she would never hear Corby's terrifying laugh.

"What do you say?" Bill called out. "You going to be sensible?"

Miller fought down a raging impulse to shout back at him, to flail the pair of them with every vicious obscenity he could dredge up from his mind. But he held the words behind clamped teeth.

"Hey, kid!" It was Corby speaking now, the laugh bubbling up cruelly through the words. "You like that dog, I guess. Well, unless you sing out, I'm going to have to go back and shoot him. You want me to do that?"

Johnny caught his breath sharply, and Miller could feel the scream of anguish welling in the boy's throat. "No," Miller said fiercely, and clapped a hand over his son's mouth. Johnny struggled futilely to jerk himself free. "No!" Miller whispered the word into his ear. "They're trying to scare you. They won't risk shooting him. Get hold of yourself—keep your head."

After a short silence the big man, Bill, gave Corby instructions. "You go back to the house and get some food together. Bread, meat, coffee. And try to find some liquor. See if you can pick up anything on the radio or TV. I'll stay here and keep these two pinned down."

They could hear Corby's footsteps crack through the twigs in the direction of the house.

Miller took his hand from his son's mouth. He rubbed the boy's thin cold arms, held him tightly against his big body. The exchanges between the two intruders were all he had to work with now but from them he tried to form an estimate of his enemies.

The big man, Bill was obviously in command. He was blunt, forceful, a man of action with simple drives. A steak eater and whiskey drinker. He wasn't cunning or devious—he would charge like a bull in a fight, hammer his opponent bloody with brute strength. A feint or side-step would baffle and enrage him. He was contemptuous of Corby. That was apparent. In given circumstances, Miller thought, it shouldn't be too difficult to predict the big man's reactions.

It was the other man Miller really feared—Corby. Sly, cruel, vicious, his only power and confidence coming from the feel of a gun. A weak and frightened man, paying back

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the world with hatred and violence. Getting his kicks from the slam of a gun butt against the heel of his palm.

Miller heard the big man moving along the road above the mica pit. The sound faded away slowly. He was probably going to patrol back and forth on the road, extending the range of his eyes and ears.

Johnny was weeping in his arms. "They'll hurt Mommy. They'll kill her."

"No! We've got to get help."

"We can't! We can't do anything, stuck here."

"Now listen, boy: I'm helpless. So you've got to be my eyes. You've got to be my arms and legs."

"Don't make me leave you. I can't. Please." Johnny's voice was thin with terror. Miller held him tightly and rubbed his trembling arms. This was his only hope, his only support, he thought bitterly and helplessly; a terrified child.

Their safety and Madge's—their very lives—depended on keeping their heads, on behaving coolly; but he knew that it was hopeless to expect Johnny to face such a challenge. The boy had always been dependent on him. And now that the roles were reversed, Johnny didn't have the courage to accept the responsibility.

And whose fault was that?

The question rose sharply in his thoughts, as fixed and implacable as a shoal of rock standing in the rapids of a rushing stream.

Whose fault was it? The question couldn't be ignored or evaded. Who had refused to allow the boy to stand on his own feet? Miller's own words sounded in his mind, mocking the question. *Don't do this! Don't do that! It's too dangerous! It's too difficult! You're not ready for it!* That had been his constant, negative refrain.

Whose fault? It was Miller's fault, of course. He had insisted that the boy remain dependent on him. In pride or ignorance, he had raised his own strength and judgment as a standard for his son, and Johnny hadn't been able to meet it. Instead of letting him risk an occasional fall, and learning from it, he had made him use crutches; instead of letting him fail now and then, and urging him to try again with renewed determination, he had constantly stifled the boy.

What had he been afraid of? That Johnny would grow free of him? That he would become confident and strong? No! Miller knew in his heart he hadn't meant Johnny any harm. He hadn't been evil or scheming; he had simply been stupid.

And what was the nature of his own strength and independence? Was it just a form of unconfessed fear? Why the four-month supplies of food, and the storm windows up at the first turning leaf, and the snow blades and snow chains and stocks of gas and oil, and the reluctance to be dependent on electri-

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cians or plumbers or government agents? Did this indicate true confidence?

It was Madge and Johnny who had true confidence, he realized. With their imagination and gaiety, their oblique kind of excitement and humor, they were insisting that life was fun, come on and enjoy it. While he had kept insisting that life is grim, watch out!

How could he undo this damage? Would he ever have the chance? Forty-five minutes must have passed. Madge, conceivably, was on her way home. Unless Johnny helped now, they had no chance—no chance at all. Their lives would end tonight if somehow he couldn't give Johnny the strength and confidence he had always denied him.

"Johnny, please listen to me," he said. "You've got to help. You heard them talking. What kind of people are they?"

"They're robbers, murderers."

"But what else? Tell me—you've got more imagination than I have. They're from the city, don't you think?"

Miller felt the boy stiffen in his arms and raise his head. For an instant Johnny said nothing; but his sniffling sobs had ceased, and Miller could imagine the frown on his face, turned serious, intent, alert.

"City people, sure," Johnny said finally. He said nothing more for a moment. Then: "The big man knows they're in trouble. And he's got enough imagination to see what will happen if they're caught. I wouldn't say he's afraid, but he's *serious*. You know what I mean?"

Miller didn't quite understand. But he said, "Yes, Johnny. Go on."

"He's not really dangerous," Johnny said softly. "Because he's not scared. He'll do what he thinks is best to save his skin. But he won't do things to make more trouble for himself—not if he can help it. The other man is different. He doesn't have any imagination. And he's a show-off."

"How do you know that?"

"Because he's excited about being in trouble. It gives him a chance to be a big shot—that's all he sees. Because he doesn't have any imagination. That's why he's dangerous. He wants things to happen to him."

Miller heard Johnny swallow hard—the sound was dry and distinct in the stillness of the little cave. "Dad? They might get hurt out here. They don't know about farms."

"Yes," Miller said. He had listened to his son with a strange and welcome sense of pride and humility; the boy's estimate of the two men had been shrewder than his own, more significant and perceptive. But how could they use it?

"What are you thinking about?"

"Well—it's got to be the big man. Because he's *serious*. He'll do what he thinks is sensible—if we can make him. But the other man will

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do just what makes him feel like a bit shot. It's too risky."

"What's too risky?"

"He is," Johnny said softly. "But listen: maybe we can make the big man run into some kind of trouble. There's the dry well near the apple trees." Johnny's voice rose with excitement. "And the wall of the old stone barn. You told me it was too dangerous to play around there. It's liable to fall over any minute."

"Shh!"

Miller had heard the big man's footsteps coming toward them on the crest of the mica pit.

"How about it?" The man's voice was loud and impatient. "You getting cold out there? I know you haven't moved. I can hear a branch scrape fifty yards away. So come on out. Kid! You want your Ma to get hurt?"

Johnny put his arms around his father's neck, placed his lips against his ear. "I got it," he said eagerly. "The pond."

"Look, be sensible!" The big man's voice was plaintive. "We want to save our hides, that's all. Give us a break and I'll see nothing bad happens to either you or your Ma if she comes back."

After a moment of silence the man swore under his breath. They heard his footsteps moving slowly along the road toward the house.

"He'll chase us, dad!" Johnny cried softly. "We can slip out through the mica pit, down the trails you hacked last summer. Then, when we get into the locusts in front of the pond, we'll make some noise. He'll come after us—I'm sure he will."

"Yes, son," Miller said. He rubbed the boy's shoulder gently with the tips of his fingers, feeling sick and futile; he knew now what was in Johnny's mind.

"He'll follow us up the bank of the pond," Johnny said, excitement making his voice quiver. "We'll go down one side, and he'll come after us—right across the hard snow where the muskrat holes are. He's big, dad. He'll crash like an oak tree."

"I can't go with you, Johnny," Miller said heavily. "I can't walk. I can't see."

A little whimper sounded in Johnny's throat. "Do I have to do it alone?"

"I'm not asking you to, Johnny."

The boy's thin arms tightened desperately about Miller's neck. "You always said you'd tell me when I was ready. Well? Am I ready, dad? Am I?"

Miller couldn't lie to him. "I don't know son. I don't know." He had always been so proud and confident of the precise tools of reason and judgment; now they seemed less than useless—clumsy, blunted, and dull. Would Johnny's plan work? The holes were knee-deep, eight to ten inches in diameter, as dangerous in freezing weather as iron pipes sunk in the ground. And

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there were dozens of them pitting the area on either side of the pier.

If a running man plunged a leg into one of them, his forward-flung weight might snap his knee like a dry twig . . . But could Johnny bring it off? Supposing the man shot him? But Johnny insisted the big man wasn't the kind to risk causing himself more trouble . . .

Miller shook his head, helplessly, hopelessly.

"I'm going!" Johnny said, pulling himself free from Miller's arms. "I'm going to try."

Miller caught the boy's shoulders in a fierce grip. "You're ready then. But listen: do exactly what I tell you! Listen . . ."

With Johnny gone, the hideout became a jail for Miller—a tiny, freezing cell, barred by the sharp thorns and thick, intertwined branches of the old rosebush. He didn't know if he could get out of it by himself, whether or not he could climb the narrow, twisting tunnel to the top of the mica pit.

For a few moments he followed the sounds of passage—a snapping twig, the whipping noise of a release branch, a rustle of dry leaves—as Johnny worked his way carefully across the mica pit. Then even these faint noises died away; a complete silence settled around him.

Johnny must now be near the stand of locusts between the mica pit and the pond—about a hundred yards away. Safe for a moment. But the pond was still a hundred yards farther on. The boy's job was to keep a tantalizing distance ahead of the big man, firing him with the thought that Johnny was almost within grasp. But nearing the pond the boy would have to increase his lead to give himself time to climb the bank and circle the area of the muskrat holes. Finally—and this was what made Miller's heart pound with fear—he must let the man get within a few dozen feet of him before making his deliberately noisy charge down the opposite bank. This would make the big man charge across the crust of snow, charge over the muskrat holes . . .

Now Miller heard the big man moving along the road above. "You want me to send Corby out here?" he shouted. "He'd like to spray some bullets around."

From beyond the mica pit, deep in the locust trees, Johnny's voice sounded faintly but clearly, "Hey, dad! Dad? Where are you?"

In the silence Miller heard the big man's sudden gasp. "Don't be scared, kid!" he shouted. "Your dad came up to the house. Wait! I'll come get you."

Johnny's frightened sobs carried sharply through the cold air. Miller prayed that it was an act, that Johnny was following instructions—but the sobbing sounded almost too desolate to be anything other than genuine.

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Miller tried to guess what the big man would do. He couldn't go toward Johnny in a straight line; his flashlight would show him that the mica pit was impassable. Johnny had made it only by following the tangled old trails. The big man would probably run back toward the house first, circle the mica pit, then go down the lawn toward the stands of locusts.

"Dad?" It was Johnny's voice again, fainter, farther away; he had retreated another fifty yard into the trees.

The big man's running footsteps were moving in the direction of the house. "All right, kid, just stay put. Your dad's okay." The string of words diminished in volume as his strides carried him rapidly away from Miller.

Miller held his breath and prayed silently. In spite of the cold, sweat had started on his forehead. In his mind's eye he saw the two figures converging in the darkness—the big man charging down the smooth lawn, and Johnny, breathless and frightened as a small hunted animal, stealing slowly through the night toward the pond.

Suddenly he heard Johnny scream, and Miller's whole body stiffened with shock. Had the big man got his hands on Johnny? But then the man's voice floated plaintively through the trees. "Wait, kid! Damn it, *wait!*"

Johnny was following the script perfectly, Miller thought with a fierce, animal pride. Getting the lead he needed to scramble up the bank . . .

Miller scratched around for the entrance to the tunnel. He had to get out of here now, try to climb up to the road. If Johnny were caught, Miller must be free to warn Madge. Somehow he would have to crawl or drag himself to the top of the drive where the headlights of her car would pick him up . . .

At one point he almost gave up; he seemed helplessly trapped, with cold, saw-tooth branches blocking his way on three sides. Somehow he blundered past a turn in the tunnel, wedged himself into a dense, sealed pocket of underbrush. He forced his body backward, squirming an inch at a time on his elbows and knees, cursing weakly at the thorns tearing at his back and arms.

But his forward progress had dislodged a taut branch, and as he struggled back down the tunnel, it snapped across the backs of his knees, locking them to the ground with its thorny weight. He could find no leverage, no purchase, to apply against it; and he couldn't reach it with his hands.

"Dear God!" he cried out softly, as his arms gave way under his weight. He collapsed full-length in the narrow tunnel, fighting for breath with heaving lungs.

It was then that he heard the big man's high, shocked scream; and while its echoes were still ringing in the cold air, another cry sound-

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ed—a high, raging snarl, like that of an animal caught in the jaws of a steel trap.

Miller forced himself to his hands and knees and bucked frantically at the branches clutching at his knees. He tore himself free with fanatical strength, indifferent to the thorns ripping his skin, unaware of the scalding pain in the torn ligaments of his ankle. One thought blazed in his mind: the big man might be out of it now . . . but that left Corby.

At the top of the mica pit, free from the thorns and brambles, Miller crawled along the rutted road toward the house, lurching through the cold silence like a blind and sick old dog. When he came to the heavy frames of the sawhorses, he moved crabwise to the side of the road, and propped himself up against an old pear tree.

He heard nothing more from the pond. This frightened him; if the big man were hurt, he should be screaming for Corby to come and get him. But all Miller could hear was the cold sigh of the wind in the bare, black trees, and from somewhere away off to his left, the faint bugling call of a 'coon hound.

Miller had told John to return to the sawhorses. Johnny had wanted to sneak to the parking lot and unchain Baron, but Miller had said no; he didn't want Johnny to come that close to the house. And even if Baron were free it wouldn't help—he'd circle the house furiously, trying to get at the intruder, but Corby could easily shoot him through a door or window without exposing himself to danger.

A twig cracked a few dozen feet away. Johnny's voice sounded cautiously, "Dad? You make it okay?"

Miller could hardly speak; he felt drained and weak, almost sick with relief. "Here!" he said at last, and his voice was a croak in his ears.

Johnny scurried across the ground and threw himself into his father's arms. "I did it, dad," he cried, and when Miller hugged the boy to him, he suddenly felt a cold metallic weight pressing against his chest.

"What's this?"

"I got his gun, dad," Johnny said in a frantic breathless voice. "When he fell it got away from him and slid across the hard snow. He couldn't reach it. His leg is broken, I think."

"He's not shouting for help. Why?"

"I hit him with the gun," Johnny said, and Miller felt the shudder sweeping through his son's slight body. "I had to! I knew he'd yell for the other man. So I hit him with the butt of the gun until he was—unconscious."

"It's all right." Miller rubbed the boy's arms gently. "Don't think about it."

"I don't mind thinking about it," Johnny said in a thin, cold voice. "Honest, I don't. But how can we get the other one now?"

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"Give me the gun," Miller said. It was a revolver, a .38. The safety was on. He rolled out the cylinder and felt for the cartridges with the ball of his thumb. The gun was fully loaded. He flipped the cylinder back into place, heard it secure itself with a faint click.

"What can we do?" Johnny asked him. Miller tried to review the situation realistically; it would be stupid to make a miscalculation now through false confidence. But they did have a chance. The big man was out of it for good. And now they had a gun.

Baron's barking had subsided in the last five minutes and he had stopped lunging at his chain. Miller could imagine him lying with his muzzle on his paws, his great teeth half bared, his shining eyes fixed on the kitchen door. Now if they could get Corby outside somehow, and free Baron . . .

Miller's hand tightened on the butt of the revolver. He felt hope rising in him; a plan had suddenly clicked into place in his mind. Simple, safe, deadly.

"Listen to me, Johnny!" he said in a sharp whisper. "What we're going to do—" Then he hesitated, the words dying on his lips.

"What, dad?"

Miller wet his dry lips. Could he gamble any more? he thought desperately. Could he trust Johnny to solve this problem? Miller's plan was an obvious and inevitable one; but did he dare squander time in the hope that Johnny would see it by himself? Could he risk their lives to give the boy confidence, to make him stand squarely on his two feet, to give him courage?

"I don't know what we can do," Miller told Johnny. "You've got to help me, son."

Johnny's thin cold arms tightened around Miller's neck. "I'm afraid of the man in the house," he said in a trembling voice. "He's different from the other man. I can't help it, dad. I'm scared."

"We can't just hide out here. What can we do? Think, Johnny, think!"

Johnny was silent for several seconds, but Miller could hear the uneven little catch in the boy's breath, and feel the frantic beat of his heart. Then Johnny pulled himself away from Miller. "Can you crawl, dad?" he said softly.

"I think so, son."

"A pretty good way, I mean—back down the road past the mica pit?"

"I'll make it, son, don't worry."

"Listen to me then." Johnny's voice was shaking with excitement. "You crawl back down the road with the gun. I'll sneak up to the doghouse. Give me about three minutes. I'll make a big circle and come up on the other side of the parking lot, so the man inside won't have any chance to see me. Then—after three minutes—you start firing the gun. That'll bring him outside, won't it?"

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"Yes," Miller said.

"He'll think it's the big man shooting at us, won't he?" Johnny asked softly.

"Of course, that's it—and he'll come running out."

"Then—when he gets down the road where it's dark—I'll unchain Baron."

It was Miller's own plan—safe deadly. He hugged Johnny fiercely. "It's got to work," he said. "It can't miss. You're thinking like an IBM machine. I'm proud of you." Baron would go for Corby like a streak of pure, deliberate fury, belly close to the ground, and no warning growl sounding in his throat.

Corby might hear the clawing paws on the hard ground, but that would be all; his first intimation of disaster would be the weight of Baron's body driving for his throat.

"Dad, I'm going! Give me three minutes. I'll—"

"Quiet!" Miller said sharply. He had just heard the kitchen door open.

"It's him," Johnny whispered. "He's coming out."

"Bill!" Corby's shout was querulous and impatient. "You find them two yet?"

"He's walking toward the road," Johnny whispered.

Corby shouted again. "Bill? What the hell you doing out there?"

"Is he coming toward us?" Miller asked.

"No," Johnny whispered. "He's stopped just at the edge of the light coming from the kitchen. He's looking down this way—trying to see I guess."

Corby shouted again, and this time there was a ragged note of fear and suspicion in his voice. "Bill? You out there? Sound off, damn you! You run out on me and I'll fix you for it if it takes the rest of my life. Bill!" Corby's voice rose in a furious scream. "You sneak off and I'll get you. You hear?"

He was about forty yards from them, Miller estimated, staring into the cold black tunnel of the road. "Has he got a flashlight?"

"No."

But even with a flashlight he couldn't see them, Miller guessed; they were crouched behind a big tree beside the road and further shielded by the bulky frames of the sawhorse.

Suddenly Baron began to bark again. Johnny whimpered in his father's arms. "There's a car turning in the drive," he said, and a hopeless sob bubbled in his throat. "It's Mommy."

Miller held himself in control with an almost physical effort. "Maybe it's not Mommy," he said. "Where's the man now? What's he doing?"

"He's running toward the parking lot. He's disappeared into the shadows at the front of the house." Johnny grabbed at the gun in Miller's hand. "Give it to me! Please. I can stop him."

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"No!" Miller gripped the boy tightly in his arms. "You wouldn't have a chance." He listened to the sound of the car coming in the drive. Madge invariably shifted to second gear when she reached the grade leading up to the parking area. And this car was slowing down at the hill, then coming on powerfully as the driver shifted gears. Baron's thundering confirmed his fears—the dog had recognized the car.

"It's her," Johnny cried in a breaking voice. "It's Mommy."

The car had stopped, the sound of the motor fading away into the silence. Miller heard the door open, then slam shut with a crisp bang. He tried to pray, but his lips were stiff with fear. The prayer sounded only in his mind: *"Don't let him hurt her. Please."*

And then he heard Madge's scream of shock and terror. The sound cut across his straining nerves like a whip.

"He's got her!" Johnny said frantically. "He's pushing her toward the front door. I can see them in the light from the foyer. Give me the gun!" His fingers clawed at Miller's locked hands. "Give it to me!"

"No! He won't do anything to her yet. He'll bargain with us first."

"There's nothing we can do. We can't let him hurt her. *We can't.*"

"I know, I know. But we've got to hang on. Let him make his move."

They didn't have to wait long. In less than a minute the kitchen door opened, and Miller heard Corby's booted feet crunching over the hard ground. The footsteps stopped and Corby shouted, "I got your wife, mister. And kid? I got your Mommy." He laughed sharply, and there was a thread of cruel satisfaction in his voice. "Maybe you're too young to know it, kid, but she's a pretty cute chick. So far she's nice and comfortable. Except that she ain't in condition to kick her heels in the air. I got her tied up like a Christmas turkey. She couldn't get loose if she were Houdini."

Corby's voice grew louder as he walked slowly toward the mouth of the narrow road. "You're hiding out there, I know. But the game is over. Hear me? I'm giving you just five minutes to get up here to the house with your hands nice and high in the air. Otherwise your Mommy won't be so nice and comfortable any more. You come on in now and we'll all leave together. If you don't, you'll hear her screaming. I don't care how far away you are—you'll hear her."

Miller heard Corby's footsteps crunch back to the house, heard the bang of the kitchen door. The thought of Madge tied down like an animal made Miller tremble with a sick, weakening rage; for he knew how violently she abhorred any restraint or confinement. Her will was like a slender steel rod

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which could be bent double without snapping; she would accept pain as a lesser price than capitulation to brute, bullying strength. To do this thing to her, to mock her fastidious pride in the freedom of her own person, would be like breaking the wings of a song bird —that unpardonable.

"Dad! I've got to let Baron loose. It's all we can do."

"No!" Miller shook his head helplessly, trying to regroup his frightened, splintered thoughts. "It won't help now. The man won't come outside."

"I've got an idea!" Johnny squirmed out of his arms like an eel. Miller groped for him, but the boy was gone by then, his flying footsteps sounding in the direction of the house.

"Don't!" Miller cried hoarsely. "Come back!"

But by then he had lost the sound; a rising wind smothered his son's running steps and hurled Miller's words incoherently into the night. A sob burst from his throat. Was the boy going to throw himself at the man? Pit his puny fists against Corby's sadistic strength?

Miller struggled to his knees. How much time was left? Three minutes? Two? He wasn't sure he could drag himself to the house in time. And getting there wouldn't save his wife and son—it would only postpone their ordeal, not end it.

But then, as he lurched toward the sawhorse, he heard Johnny returning, his feet skittering dryly over the frozen ground. The boy sank down beside him, gasping for breath.

"Dad, I've got some cord from the woodshed." The boy's fingers dug into Miller's shoulder. "Listen to me. We can tie the rope around the trigger of the gun and lock the gun in the vise on the sawhorse. Then I'll go to the house and tell the man you're hurt, that you can't walk. He'll come out to get you. I'll walk up to the sawhorse and stop in front of the gun. He'll be standing behind me. Then I'll move out of the way and yell for you to shoot." Johnny's voice was trembling. "Won't it work, dad? Won't it?"

"Quiet!" Miller said.

"What's the matter?"

"Quiet, damn it!" Miller pulled the boy close to him. "Let me think!" Use your sharp, efficient brain, he thought coldly and savagely. You were so damned proud of your wits. Okay, put them to work. You've got to solve this problem at the first crack—you don't get a second chance.

The sawhorse straddled the lane running from the house into the woods. Check, he thought. With the gun locked in the vise, the muzzle would point approximately toward the kitchen door. Check again, he thought. And the vise was made of a plank one inch thick and eight inches wide, with

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its grip adjustable by a half-inch bolt which was cranked by a two-foot lever. The width of the plank would conceal the gun—only the small round muzzle would be visible to the man as he approached the sawhorse. And if the beam of his flashlight fell across it, Corby would probably think it was some bolt or fitting attached to the frame of the sawhorse. If Johnny could get him out of the house and if the man walked straight and direct toward the . . .

No, it was too risky, he thought with despair. Too weighted with chances and imponderables. But then Miller saw a way to reduce the risk. If he moved six or eight feet back from the sawhorse directly in line with the fixed gun, the man would probably stop at the sawhorse to make sure that Miller was really helpless. Even if he didn't stop directly in front of the gun, he would have to cross in front of it to come around to Miller.

But not necessarily. Only one side of the sawhorse was dangerous. And the man might walk around the *other* side, never exposing himself to the hidden gun.

It was a fifty-fifty chance.

Miller grabbed at it.

"Give me the cord," he said sharply.

Miller made sure the gun was on safe, then worked the cord around the trigger and fastened a slipknot behind the butt. As his fingers worked stiffly to secure the noose, he gave orders to Johnny. "When I'm through, you lock the gun in the vise, with the barrel tilted upward at about thirty degrees. Do you understand?"

"So it'll fire at his chest? Yes."

"Okay. Then go on to the house. Tell him I've hurt my leg, that I can't walk. Make sure he brings his flashlight."

"How can I do that?"

"He's got to see me—that's essential. Tell him—tell him it's dark where I am, that the ground is dangerous."

"Yes, dad."

"Walk straight down the road to the sawhorse. Get out of the way of the gun when you stop. If he's in front of the gun, you signal me. Just say, 'All right, dad.' Got that? Don't shout. Just use your normal voice."

"Supposing he tells me not to come with him? Supposing he ties me up?"

"Tell him he can't find me alone. Now listen." Miller had completed the knots. He unlocked the safety catch, then placed the gun carefully into his son's hands. "Now listen," he said. "If he doesn't stop in front of the gun—*if* he doesn't, remember—wait until he comes around to my side of the sawhorse. Watch him every second. If he comes around the left side, he's got to walk in front of the gun. Give me the signal when he's in front of it—and for God's sake, be *sure*. Not too soon, not too late."

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"Supposing he goes around the other side?"

"Just pray he doesn't," Miller said. "Now put the gun in the vise." He hugged the boy fiercely. "God bless you, son. Go on now."

Miller, holding the rope loosely, shifted himself back from the saw horse. He heard the faint but sharp sound of the gun clicking against the wooden vise. Johnny seemed to be having trouble.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing." But it seemed an eternity before the boy said, "All right, take up the slack."

Miller pulled the rope until it stretched firmly between his hand and the gun.

"I've got it, son."

Then he heard Johnny's footsteps making their way across the hard ground toward the house.

Miller tried to dismiss all thoughts of his son from his mind. And Madge. He tried to forget his love for them, forget his fears for them . . .

There was no room in his mind for anyone but the murderer who would be walking into his trap at any minute—the man whose laughter trembled with his love for cruelty and violence. Miller passed the cord under his legs and shifted his body so that his left side was facing the sawhorse. His right hand, gripping the cord, was hidden behind his body. There was no slack in the rope. One sharp pull would discharge the gun.

He heard the kitchen door opening. "Okay, mister, I'm coming to get you!" Corby's voice was loud and exultant. "Your kid told me how you tricked Bill. But don't get no ideas about fooling me. Sing out now, so I can hear where you are."

"Here!" Miller shouted. "Watch your step. The ground is bad." He had to know if the man had a light.

"Don't worry. I can see. I got a flashlight. I got everything I need to take real good care of you." Corby's tone was harsh and mocking. He was coming down the road toward him; Miller could hear the heavy ring of the man's boots on the frozen earth. "Your wife is fussing real bad to see you. It must be nice to have a cute lady like that all worried about you. I told her I was going to fix you up good." His tone changed, became rough and hard. "All right, kid, where's your old man?"

"Behind the sawhorse," Johnny said in a thin, trembling voice.

Corby's footsteps changed direction, came straight toward Miller. "I see him now." The footsteps stopped at the sawhorse. "Blind as a bat, lame as an old grandmother, sitting on the ground like a big pile of mud."

"I can't walk," Miller said.

"Ain't that a shame," Corby said.

He hadn't moved since stopping in front of the sawhorse; he would be standing motionless now, playing the light on Miller, estimating his condition.

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"You sure you can't walk?" Corby asked.

"No, I can't."

"I bet you can crawl," Corby said, laughing softly. "I bet you can crawl if I kind of help you along with my boot. What do you say, mister? Think you could make it then?"

"Do what you want to me," Miller said thickly. "But don't hurt my wife or son. Please."

"Now you're talking real nice and pleasant," Corby said. "Saying please like that. I like to hear people say please to me. But what I really like is to hear people say please stop—know what I mean? Now I'm going to come around and help you crawl up to the house to see your pretty wife. Move out of my way, kid."

Corby's boots scraped on the ground and at that instant Johnny said, "All right, dad."

Miller jerked the cord.

Nothing happened.

He jerked it again, frantically, feeling the desperate hammering of his heart against his ribs, and then —above that thudding sound—he heard Corby's high, derisive peal of laughter.

"I guess I ought to be mad at you, mister," Corby said gleefully. "But I can't just yet. You look so funny sitting there jerking on that cord. I guess you thought it was tied to a gun. Is that what you thought?" Corby laughed again, but now the sound was ugly and vicious. "You were fixing to kill me, weren't you? Blow my guts out with a gun locked in this vise. You're going to be sorry, mister. I can promise you that."

Johnny was crying hysterically. "I'm sorry, dad, I'm sorry. I was too scared. I knew it wouldn't work. I untied the gun and threw it into the woods. Then I tied the rope to the sawhorse. I—"

"Stop that sniveling," Corby said harshly.

"You promised you wouldn't hurt him," Johnny pleaded.

"Fine, brave kid you got, mister," Corby said mockingly. "Came running into the house crying like a baby. Told me what you planned to do—he made a fool out of you, didn't he? Left you sitting with a cord tied up to a sawhorse and you thinking it was still tied to the gun. Oh, he's a real blubbering hero, ain't he? If he were mine, I'd beat some starch into his backbone. And maybe I will anyway. Do you a favor, kind of."

Miller shook his head helplessly. He was too shocked to think. The boy hadn't been up to it . . . That thought finally merged in the welter of his spinning fears. Not up to it . . .

"Well, now I've had my laugh," Corby said, "and now I'm beginning to get mad." He drew the words out softly, luxuriously. "I figure I got a right to pay you folks back for trying to kill me. Yeah, I got a right. We'll go up to the house

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now and I'll have a drink or two and think about it. Now, mister, don't make me work too hard. I'm coming around behind you and you are going to start crawling. Don't make me kick you all the way up to the house. Make it easy for both of us, okay?" He laughed shrilly. "Here I come, mister."

Corby's footsteps moved confidently around the sawhorse, striking the ground with a sense of impatient authority. Corby was laughing then—and he was still laughing when the immense, shocking explosion roared suddenly against Miller's eardrums.

The echoes of the blast raced through the woods, but by that time Corby was no longer laughing—he was screaming terribly, his voice high and wild with pain. The sound came from the ground, only a foot or so from Miller's knee.

Miller's hands groped slowly and carefully toward those wild screams; his fingers touched Corby's head lightly, appraisingly, then flashed hungrily to his throat.

"I didn't throw the gun away." Johnny was saying tightly. "I hid it under the leaves. I knew that was better . . ."

The Millers' home cleared slowly. The doctor left first, then the detectives and State Troopers, and finally the reporters and photographers from the papers in Royalsville and Porchester. The red lights of the ambulance and police cars had disappeared at the foot of the driveway, and now only the occasional rising wind disturbed the deep silence of the woods.

Miller sat with his bandaged ankle propped up on a footstool in front of the fireplace. Johnny was sitting on the floor beside him, his head resting against the arm of his father's chair. Madge had gone into the kitchen only a few moments before to put on a second pot of coffee.

Miller thought of her with a touch of wonder; there had been tears, near-hysteria, when he and Johnny had removed the bonds from her wrists and ankles; but her concern had been for them, not herself. Convinced they were unhurt, she had seemingly pushed the whole ghastly experience out of her mind. It was over, done with. The doctor had treated the rope burns on her wrists, but she had refused to take a sedative. And now—incredibly and magically, it seemed to Miller—she was humming as she worked in the kitchen. Baron was with her, growling comfortingly at her heels.

Miller put a hand on Johnny's head. "Would you mind going over it just once more?" he said, smiling.

"Sure, dad." Johnny sat up straight and rubbed his eyes. "Maybe it will keep me awake while Mommy makes the sandwiches. I couldn't tell you I was changing the plan because—well, my plan depended on you being fooled, not

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just pretending or acting like you were. You see, I figured he was a show-off. And I knew he couldn't resist gloating over you, and bragging about how smart he was. So I told him our plan about the gun and about how I was supposed to signal you when he was right in front of it. I pretended I was even scareder than I was—which was some job."

Johnny let out his breath slowly and went on. "I had to make him kind of despise me—so he wouldn't pay any attention to me. Or be worried about me. Well, he had his big laugh when you pulled the cord and nothing happened. And when he walked around the sawhorse, I just took the gun from under the leaves—" Johnny's voice faltered an instant, then strengthened. "I just pointed it at him and pulled the trigger."

Corby had been dead when the doctor arrived.

Miller pulled Johnny's head against his knee. "You were very smart and very brave," he said quietly. "You did a fine job."

Madge's high heels clicked down the hallway. "Everything's ready," she said. "Shall I bring in trays? Or can you boys make it to the dining room?"

"I can make it," Miller said, struggling up in his chair. "That is, I can if Johnny will give me a hand."

"Sure, dad," Johnny said eagerly.

You didn't prove you were strong by insisting that others remain weak, Miller thought, as he limped across the room with his son's hand firmly under his arm. A simple enough thing, surely. But he hadn't known it three hours ago. Now he did. And he felt proud of the confident strength in the small hand on his arm.

"Watch the steps, dad."

"Sure thing. Thanks, son."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**AGATHA CHRISTIE**
TITLE:	***Sporting Challenge***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Hercule Poirot
LOCALE:	England
TIME:	A generation ago
COMMENTS:	*One of the "classic" problems in mystery fiction: where is the missing will? Old Andrew Marsh's native wit versus Hercule Poirot's vaunted gray cells . . .*

THE PROBLEM PRESENTED TO US by Miss Violet Marsh made rather a pleasant change from our usual routine work. Hercule Poirot had received a brisk and business-like note from the lady asking for an appointment, and he had replied asking her to call on him at eleven o'clock the following day.

She arrived punctually—a tall, handsome young woman, plainly but neatly dressed with an assured manner—clearly a young woman who meant to get on in the world. I am not a great admirer of the so-called New Woman myself, and in spite of her good looks I was not prepossessed in her favor.

"My business is of a somewhat unusual nature Monsieur Poirot" she began, after she had accepted a chair. "I had better begin at the beginning and tell you the whole story."

"If you please, mademoiselle."

"I am an orphan. My father was one of two brothers, sons of a small yeoman farmer in Devonshire. The farm was a poor one, and the elder brother, Andrew, emigrated to Australia, where he did very well indeed, and by means of successful speculation in land became a rich man. The younger brother, Roger —my father—had no leanings towards the agricultural life. He man-

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aged to educate himself a little and obtained a post as a clerk with a small firm. He married slightly above him; my mother was the daughter of a poor artist. My father died when I was six years old. When I was fourteen, my mother followed him to the grave. My only living relation then was my Uncle Andrew, who had recently returned from Australia and bought a small place, Crabtree Manor, in his native county. He was exceedingly kind to his brother's orphan child, took me in to live with him, and treated me in every way as though I was his own daughter.

"Crabtree Manor, in spite of its name, is really an old farmhouse. Farming was in my uncle's blood, and he was intensely interested in various modern farming experiments. Although kindness itself to me, he had certain peculiar and deeply-rooted ideas as to the upbringing of women. Himself a man of little or no education, though possessing remarkable shrewdness, he placed little value on what he called 'book knowledge.'

"He was especially opposed to the education of women. In his opinion, girls should learn practical housework and dairy-work be useful about the home, and have as little to do with book learning as possible. He proposed to bring me up on these lines, to my bitter disappointment and annoyance. I rebelled frankly. I knew that I possessed a good brain, and had absolutely no talent for domestic duties. My uncle and I had many bitter arguments on the subject, for, though much attached to each other, we were both self-willed.

"I was lucky enough to win a scholarship, and up to a certain point was successful in getting my own way. The crisis arose when I resolved to go to Girton. I had a little money of my own left to me by my mother, and I was quite determined to make the best use of the gifts God had given me. I had one long, final argument with my uncle. He put the facts plainly before me. He had no other relations, and he had intended me to be his sole heiress. As I have told you, he was a very rich man.

"But if I persisted in these 'newfangled notions' of mine, however, I need look for nothing from him. I remained polite, but firm. I should always be deeply attached to him, I told him, but I must lead my own life. We parted on that note.

"'You fancy your brain, my girl,' were his last words. 'I've no book learning, but, for all that, I'll pit mine against yours any day. We'll see what we shall see.'

"That was nine years ago. I have stayed with him for a week-end occasionally, and our relations were perfectly amicable, though his views remained unaltered. He never referred to my having matriculated, nor to my B. Sc. For the last three years his health had been failing, and a month ago he died.

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"I am now coming to the point of my visit. My uncle left a most extraordinary will. By its terms, Crabtree Manor and its contents are to be at my disposal for a year from his death—'during which time my clever niece may prove her wits,' the actual words run. At the end of that period, 'my wits having proved better than hers,' the house and all my uncle's large fortune pass to various charitable institutions."

"This is a little hard on you, mademoiselle, seeing that you were Mr. Marsh's only blood relation."

"I do not look on it that way. Uncle Andrew warned me fairly, and I chose my own path. Since I would not fall in with his wishes, he was at perfect liberty to leave his money to whom he pleased."

"Was the will drawn up by a lawyer?"

"No, it was written on a printed will-form and witnessed by the man and his wife who live in the house and do for my uncle."

"There might be a possibility of upsetting such a will?"

"I would not even attempt to do such a thing."

"You regard it, then, as a sporting challenge on the part of your uncle?"

"That is exactly how I do look upon it."

"It bears that interpretation, certainly," said Poirot thoughtfully. "Somewhere in this rambling old manor-house your uncle has concealed either a sum of money in notes or possibly a second will, and has given you a year in which to exercise your ingenuity to find it."

"Exactly, Monsieur Poirot, and I am paying you the compliment of assuming that your ingenuity will be greater than mine."

"Eh, eh! but that is very charming of you. My gray cells are at your disposal. You have made no search yourself?"

"Only a cursory one; but I have too much respect for my uncle's undoubted abilities to fancy that the task will be an easy one."

"Have you the will or a copy of it with you?"

Miss Marsh handed a document across the table. Poirot ran through it, nodding to himself.

"Made three years ago. Dated March 25; and the time is given also—11 A.M.—that is very suggestive. It narrows the field of search. Assuredly it is another will we have to seek for. A will made even half an hour later would upset this. *Eh bien,* mademoiselle, it is a problem charming and ingenious that you have presented to me here. I shall have all the pleasure in the world in solving it for you. Granted that your uncle was a man of ability, his gray cells cannot have been of the quality of Hercule Poirot's!

"Fortunately, I have nothing of moment on hand at the minute. Hastings and I will go down to

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Crabtree Manor tonight. The man and wife who attended on your uncle are still there, I presume?"

"Yes, their name is Baker."

The following morning saw us started on the hunt. We had arrived late the night before. Mr. and Mrs. Baker, having received a telegram from Miss Marsh, were expecting us. They were a pleasant couple, the man gnarled and pink-cheeked, like a shriveled pippin, and his wife a woman of vast proportions and true Devonshire calm.

Tired with our journey and the eight-mile drive from the station, we had retired at once to bed after a supper of roast chicken apple pie and Devonshire cream. We had now disposed of an excellent breakfast and were sitting in a small paneled room which had been the late Mr. Marsh's study and living room. A roll-top desk stuffed with papers, all neatly docketed, stood against the wall, and a big leather armchair showed plainly that it had been its owner's constant resting place. A big chintz-covered settee ran along the opposite wall, and the deep low window seats were covered with the same faded chintz of an old-fashioned pattern.

"Eh bien mon ami" said Poirot lighting one of his tiny cigarettes, "we must map out our plan of campaign. Already I have made a rough survey of the house, but I am of opinion that any clue will be found in this room. We shall have to go through the documents in the desk with meticulous care. Naturally, I do not expect to find the will amongst them; but it is likely that some apparently innocent paper may conceal the clue to its hiding place. But first we must have a little information. Ring the bell, I pray of you."

I did so. While we were waiting for it to be answered, Poirot walked up and down, looking about him approvingly.

"A man of method this Mr. Marsh. See how neatly the packets of papers are docketed. Then the key to each drawer has its ivory label—so has the key of the china cabinet on the wall. And see with what precision the china within is arranged. It rejoices the heart. Nothing here offends the eye—"

He came to an abrupt pause, as his eye was caught by the key of the desk itself, to which a dirty envelope was affixed. Poirot frowned at it and withdrew it from the lock. On it were scrawled the words: *Key of Roll-Top Desk,* in a crabbed handwriting quite unlike the neat superscriptions on the other keys.

"An alien note," said Poirot, frowning. "I could swear that here we have no longer the personality of Mr. Marsh. But who else has been in the house? Only Miss Marsh and she if I mistake not is also a young lady of method and order."

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Baker came in answer to the bell.

"Will you fetch madame your wife, and answer a few questions?"

Baker departed, and in a few moments returned with Mrs. Baker, wiping her hands on her apron and beaming all over her face.

In a few clear words Poirot set forth the object of his mission. The Bakers were immediately sympathetic.

"Us don't want to see Miss Violet done out of what's hers" declared the woman. "Cruel hard 'twould be for strangers to get it all."

Poirot proceeded with his questions. Yes, Mr. and Mrs. Baker remembered perfectly witnessing the will. Baker had previously been sent in to the neighboring town to get two printed will-forms.

"Two?" said Poirot sharply.

"Yes, sir, for safety like, I suppose, in case he should spoil one—and sure enough, so he did do. Us had signed one—"

"What time of day was that?"

Baker scratched his head, but his wife was quicker.

"Why, to be sure, I'd just put the milk on for the cocoa at eleven. Don't 'ee remember? It had all boiled over on the stove when us got back to kitchen."

"And afterwards?"

" 'Twould be about an hour later. Us had to go in again. 'I've made a mistake,' says old master, 'had to tear the whole thing up. I'll trouble you to sign again,' and us did. And afterwards master give us a tidy sum of money each. 'I've left you nothing in my will,' says he, 'but each year I live you'll have this to be a nest-egg when I'm gone'. And sure enough, so he did."

Poirot reflected. "After you had signed the second time, what did Mr. Marsh do?"

"Went out to the village to pay tradesmen's books."

That did not seem very promising. Poirot tried another tack. He held out the key of the desk.

"Is that your master's writing?"

I may have imagined it, but I fancied that a moment or two elapsed before Baker replied "Yes sir, it is."

"He's lying," I thought. "But why?"

"Has your master let the house?—have there been any strangers in it during the last three years?"

"No, sir."

"No visitors?"

"Only Miss Violet."

"No strangers of any kind been inside this room?"

"No, sir."

"You forget the workmen, Jim," his wife reminded him.

"Workmen?" Poirot wheeled round on her. "What workmen?"

The woman explained that about two years and a half ago workmen had been in the house to do certain repairs. She was quite vague as to what the repairs were. Her view seemed to be that the whole thing was a fad of her master's and quite unnecessary. Part of the time the

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workmen had been in the study; but what they had done there she could not say, as her master had not let either of them into the room while the work was in progress. Unfortunately, they could not remember the name of the firm employed, beyond the fact that it was a Plymouth one.

"We progress, Hastings," said Poirot, rubbing his hands as the Bakers left the room. "Clearly he made a second will and then had workmen from Plymouth in to make a suitable hiding place. Instead of wasting time taking up the floor and tapping the walls, we will go to Plymouth."

With a little trouble, we were able to get the information we wanted. After one or two essays we found the firm employed by Mr. Marsh.

Their employees had all been with them many years, and it was easy to find the two men who had worked under Mr. Marsh's orders. They remembred the job perfectly. Among various other minor jobs, they had taken up one of the bricks of the old-fashioned fireplace, made a cavity beneath, and so cut the brick that it was impossible to see the join. By pressing on the second brick from the end, the whole thing was raised. It had been quite a complicated piece of work and the old gentleman had been very fussy about it. Our informant was a man called Coghan, a big, gaunt man with a grizzled mustache. He seemed an intelligent fellow.

We returned to Crabtree Manor in high spirits and locking the study door, proceeded to put our newly acquired knowledge into effect. It was impossible to see any sign on the bricks, but when we pressed in the manner indicated, a deep cavity was at once disclosed.

Eagerly Poirot plunged in his hand. Suddenly his face fell from elation to consternation. All he held was a charred fragment of stiff paper. Otherwise, the cavity was empty.

"Sacré!" cried Poirot angrily. "Someone has been before us."

We examined the scrap of paper anxiously. Clearly it was a fragment of what we sought. A portion of Baker's signature remained, but no indication of what the terms of the will had been.

Poirot rocked back on his heels. His expression would have been comical if we had not been so overcome.

"I understand it not," he growled. "Who destroyed this? And what was their object?"

"The Bakers?" I suggested.

"Pourquoi? Neither will makes any provision for them, and they are more likely to be kept on with Miss Marsh than if the place became the property of a hospital. How could it be to anyone's advantage to *destroy* the will? The hospitals benefit—yes; but one cannot suspect institutions."

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"Perhaps the old man changed his mind and destroyed it himself," I suggested.

Poirot rose to his feet, dusting his knees with his usual care.

"That may be," he admitted. "One of your more sensible observations, Hastings. Well, we can do no more here. We have successfully pitted our wits against the late Andrew Marsh's; but, unfortunately, his niece is no better off for our success."

By driving to the station at once, we were just able to catch a train to London though not the express. Poirot was sad and dissatisfied. For my part, I was tired and dozed in a corner. Suddenly, as we were just moving out of Taunton, Poirot uttered a piercing squeal.

"*Vite,* Hastings! Awake and jump! But jump I say!"

Before I knew it we were standing on the platform, bareheaded and minus our valises, while the train disappeared into the night. I was furious. But Poirot paid no attention.

"Imbecile that I have been!" he cried. "Triple imbecile! Not again will I vaunt my little gray cells!"

"That's a good job at any rate," I said grumpily. "But what is this all about?"

As usual, when following out his own ideas, Poirot paid absolutely no attention to me.

"The tradesmen's books—I have left them entirely out of account! Yes, but where? Where? Never mind, I cannot be mistaken. We must return at once."

Easier said than done. We managed to get a slow train to Exeter, and there Poirot hired a car. We arrived back at Crabtree Manor in the small hours of the morning. I pass over the bewilderment of the Bakers when we had at last aroused them. Paying no attention to anybody, Poirot strode at once to the study.

"I have been, not a triple imbecile, but thirty-six times one, my friend," he deigned to remark. "Now, behold!"

Going straight to the desk, he drew out the key and detached the envelope from it. I stared at him stupidly. How could he possibly hope to find a big will-form in that tiny envelope? With great care he cut open the envelope, laying it out flat. Then he lighted the fire and held the plain inside surface of the envelope to the flame. In a few minutes faint characters began to appear.

"Look, *mon ami!*" cried Poirot in triumph.

I looked. There were just a few lines of faint writing stating briefly that he left everything to his niece, Violet Marsh. It was dated March 25, 12.30 P. M., and witnessed by Albert Pike confectioner and Jessie Pike, married woman.

"But is it legal?" I gasped.

"As far as I know, there is no

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law against writing your will in a blend of disappearing ink. The intention of the testator is clear, and the beneficiary is his only living relation. But the cleverness of him! He foresaw every step that a searcher would take—that I, miserable imbecile, took. He gets two will-forms, makes the servants sign twice, then sallies out with his will written on the inside of a dirty envelope and a fountain pen containing his little ink mixture. On some excuse he gets the confectioner and his wife to sign their names under his own signature, then he ties it to the key of his desk, and chuckles to himself. If his niece sees through his little ruse, she will have justified her choice of life and elaborate education, and be thoroughly welcome to his money."

"She didn't see through it did she?" I said slowly. "It seems rather unfair. The old man really won."

"But no, Hastings. It is *your* wits that go astray. Miss Marsh proved the astuteness of her wits and the value of higher education for women by at once putting the matter in *my* hands. Always employ the expert. She has amply proved her right to the money."

I wonder—I very much wonder—what old Andrew Marsh would have thought!

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**NICHOLAS DIMINNO**
TITLE:	***The Case of the Gyp Joint***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	The Lieutenant
LOCALE:	United States
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Who among us hasn't been gypped the same way? Even the Lieutenant had once been "taken." But it was the Lieutenant's job to nail every murderer . . .*

THE LIEUTENANT KNEW THE kind of store it was. It sold clocks and radios that stopped working when you reached home. He'd been gypped once himself by a store like this, and by just one of these gaudy-colored radios. So he could sympathize with whoever had shot this fellow now lying on the floor, and if this was the Lieutenant's own little kingdom he'd let the guy go free and give him a cigar. But he received those big fat checks twice a month for nailing murderers and seeing they got what was coming to them.

The owner of the store, Martin, was mopping his brow. He was in his shirt sleeves, and a huge fan on the wall was throwing air around.

"What was his name again?"

"Harris—George Harris."

"He work for you long?"

"Six years."

The Lieutenant wrote it down in his book. "I guess he made an enemy or two. I mean, all salesmen do, eh?"

"Can't avoid it in a store like this," Martin agreed heavily. "We're on a main street—a street lots of tourists and sailors hit when they reach town. Let me tell you, I could write a book—"

"Once in a while some customer was unhappy about something Harris sold him, right?"

"That's bound to happen," Martin sighed. "Law of averages, you know."

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I know. Maybe one or two even threatened him?"

"Every day. If threats scared us we'd be out of business in a week."

The place he'd been gypped, the Lieutenant remembered now, was just across the street.

"How did it happen again?" the Lieutenant persisted.

Martin sighed again. He seemed depressed, perhaps at the death of his salesman but more likely, the Lieutenant mused, at the thought that his store was locked up and all those sailors outside were going past without his cheap radios.

"I'm working in the back when I hear a shot. I run out and see George has been hit. He falls right there. Someone is going out the door and I just see his back. All I can tell is it's a man."

"Young, old?"

"In my state of mind?" Martin shook his head. "I just threw a look, then went to George. He was dead. I wanted to rush out and yell, 'Stop him, stop him,' but with the mobs that come by every day it's like looking for a needle in a haystack. All he had to do was not run and nobody'd ever find him."

"What time was this?"

"Nine fifteen."

"No other customers in the store?"

"George was just opening up. I figure he let this fellow in and was coming back to the counter when he got shot."

"So you didn't run out?"

"With that army of people out there? What could you find? All those faces, faces, faces. I didn't see this fellow's face, remember."

The Lieutenant looked out the window. People were pouring by steadily, as though fed out of a hopper. Where did they all come from? Where were they all going?

The Lieutenant got down on his haunches and checked George Harris' body. He'd been shot in the back, a neat little hole in the salesman's white shirt. The man on the floor looked philosophical. Maybe George had known that it would come sooner or later, selling those cheap radios.

"Any particular threats in the last few days? Maybe some sailor who'd had too much to drink and bought one of your binoculars that fell apart when he used it?"

Martin looked hurt. "I pay top price for them, officer. All I know is—"

"Any threats you remember?"

"Plenty."

"From what kind of people?"

"Tall, short, rich, poor." Martin grimaced. "I could write a book."

"You had that many dissatisfied customers? How do you keep doing business?" the Lieutenant said curiously.

Martin waved toward the stream of people. "We get a fresh supply every day. Thousands. Plus which I try to be fair—as far as I can be and still make a living, with the rent what it is."

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The Lieutenant's heart bled for him. He straighted up and went to the counter and called out to the coroner. The coroner said that Harris had been killed with a bullet in the lower back, a .32 caliber slug, fired from a range of perhaps five or seven feet. The coroner too had been gypped in one of these stores and he half hoped the Lieutenant would never find the guy who did it.

"Do I have to stay closed all day?" Martin said.

This Martin had a heart of pure quartz. His salesman shot and he was anxious to get him out the back door so that he could start moving those cheap radios again. It irked the Lieutenant; yet to be fair, he had to say sure, the store could open up again as soon as the boys had carted Harris' body out.

Having had enough of Mr. Martin for one morning, the Lieutenant left and was caught up almost immediately in the columns of people that walked ceaselessly toward the bright-light district and in the opposite direction. There were well-dressed women, derelicts, sailors, teenagers, tourists, people who'd been attracted to the Big Drag, people who worked here. Yes, Martin had a fresh supply every day. And those blazing red signs in his window that said *Close-Out Sale!* were a magnet to the hicks. They'd caught one hick a few years ago who was now a Lieutenant of Police.

With some difficulty he made his way against the tides of people to the cop on the corner. His name was Powers and he was studying law nights. That was all the Lieutenant knew about him.

"I couldn't say they were actually crooked in there," Powers said in reply to his question. "But I'd never swear they were honest, either. They're like the other stores on this block. Which isn't a compliment."

"You got many complaints on this Martin?"

"Oh, about twice a day somebody'd take me by the arm and march me back there to get his money back. Hundreds don't bother. You know, they don't like to admit they've been fooled."

That was exactly how the Lieutenant had felt. He'd wanted to come back and shoot somebody, but all he'd done was kick the radio into the ashcan.

"See any good suspects, Powers?"

Powers ran a finger under his collar. "There was a one wild-eyed guy who came along shaking a radio and cursing. It was a fancy cerise job that didn't work. One of Martin's. He was cursing and mumbling and headed up the street. To the bars. To forget his troubles."

The Lieutenant looked down the street. There was a string of neons proclaiming shots for thirty cents. He got a description of the man—

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ragged blue jacket, gray trousers. And a felt fedora. In this weather a felt fedora. The Lieutenant could not miss him.

In the next hour the Lieutenant learned that there were a lot of men who wore felt fedoras in summer—especially men who went to places where shots were thirty cents apiece. He moved in and out of the cool darkness, his feet making noises in the sawdust, while barflies stared at him blankly. It was hot work and he was tempted more than once to ask the bartender to draw one, but it wouldn't look right. It would look as if the police were human, and that, according to all the rules, was out.

So the Lieutenant sweltered and moved along the street, in one bar and out another, and it was almost noon before he found the blue jacket and gray trousers. They belonged to a seedy-looking fellow of about fifty, with burning eyes and a two-day growth of beard. The Lieutenant came up silently, gave him a quick frisk—nothing—and edged beside him. The burning eyes stared at him.

"Hot," the Lieutenant remarked.

The man said something vague.

How should he play this? Straight? Or like a Dutch uncle, drawing him out and agreeing what a rat that salesman Harris had been? But it was hot, too hot, and this guy didn't look in shape to stay awake long.

"You buy a radio up the street?"

For answer the man took a tiny portable from his pocket and shook it in the Lieutenant's ear. It was cerise and beautiful to behold. You couldn't expect it to play too.

"Does it work?" The Lieutenant had to be sure.

The man turned back to the bar and tossed off a shot of rye. He seemed to have been at it quite a while. His fedora was cocked crazily on his head and he kept brushing a lock of gray hair from his eyes.

"Going to have it fixed?" said the Lieutenant.

"Going to have another belt," the man said solemnly. "Another couple belts. Then I'm going back and fix *him*." He nodded gravely and hit the bar to get the bartender's attention.

"Sure you didn't go back already?" The Lieutenant frowned—maybe this wasn't the guy after all, maybe he was on the wrong track.

"Went back. Store closed." The burning eyes bored into him.

"So you didn't go in?" The Lieutenant felt foolish saying it.

"Couldn't. Store closed."

This guy might be a fox. Anybody could turn up the voltage in his eyes and pretend to be drunker than he was.

"Did you go into Martin's this morning? Around nine fifteen?"

"Martin's?" The eyes blinked.

"About this?" The Lieutenant tapped the radio with his thumb.

"Closed. Going back later."

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"For what?"

"Give 'em a piece of my mind. Choke 'em." The man pondered. "Who knows?"

The Lieutenant crooked a hand under the man's armpit and led him out to the street. They walked along, the man lurching and the Lieutenant having to lurch after him, so that they looked like two drunks to the people passing by. That was one part of his job he did not like. You attracted attention and the Lieutenant hated to attract attention.

Martin was bustling around, serving the five or six customers who clustered around the counter. If he was hiding grief he was doing a good job of it. The Lieutenant tapped him on the shoulder and the three of them went to the rear of the store. Martin's eyes took in the ragged man.

"Could be?" the Lieutenant said hopefully.

"Could be," said Martin. "He wore a kind of jacket like that."

"How about the fedora?"

"I didn't get a look at his head."

Some witness, thought the Lieutenant. He'd be a lot of help on the stand.

The Lieutenant tugged the man's sleeve and pulled him out of the store and down to the car. Rooney was sitting there, looking over the human comedy—at least, he hoped Rooney was looking over the human comedy. Probably he was just thinking of a cool shower.

"Take this guy down and put him on ice. I'll check what he's been doing all morning."

Rooney looked at the ragged fellow and wrinkled his nose. The guy was getting to be a snob. Pretty soon he'd arrest only the Four Hundred.

"He's not contaminated. Pull him in."

Rooney pulled him in and drove off. It was getting hotter by the minute. The Lieutenant took off his Palm Beach hat and thought, as he mopped his neck, that it was as close to Palm Beach as he'd ever get.

He looked up and down the street and it was some seconds before it came to him. The sudden quiet, the sudden emptiness of the streets. No streams of people going nowhere, no crush at the store windows . . . what was up? And then he saw. Up by the entrance to the sporting goods store they were eddying, pushing, shoving—a huge knot of them. There were even a few cops to keep order.

He walked up and by dint of shoving and pushing with the best of them made his way toward the center of the crowd. There were two girls, cute as buttons, dressed in tights and something beaded across the chest, and they were giving something away. He pushed and shoved some more, then stretched out a hand until he got his. It was a new candy bar, Big Joe. No wonder the crowds. Big

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Joe wasn't so big but the girls were real lookers. You didn't run into that kind at a dance—at least, not the dances the Lieutenant attended. They had to be models, he thought as he slipped the bar into his pocket and eased himself out toward the street.

"I think you'd better break this up," he said to one of the cops, a traffic man named Correll.

"It's really something, hah Lieutenant? Everybody's stopping. Even some guys that I know personally are big bankers. As long as it's free, hah Lieutenant?"

"Maybe it's the girls."

"Maybe so." Correll, a beefy man, began to thrust himself into the crowd like a bull. "All right, all right, break it up."

The crowd broke reluctantly, with remnants scurrying around to avoid Correll and reach out hands for the candy the winsome girls offered laughingly. At last Correll made his presence felt—about the same time the girls ran out of candy—and the streams resumed up and down the street as the girls found shelter in the lobby of the store. The Lieutenant went after them.

"The candy's gone, bud. Take a walk." This from a strong-arm man, who no doubt was there to discourage passes. He had a grip on the Lieutenant's arm.

"*You* take a walk." The Lieutenant held his badge under the tough guy's nose.

"Oh, sorry, Chief. But some people don't understand it's only the candy that's free." He sidled off with a grin and the Lieutenant turned to the girls, who were now wide-eyed and breathless and starting to protest that they were perfectly decent and these beads covered every inch.

"I noticed," he said. "How long you been doing this?"

They chimed in to say they had begun this morning, but the job was only temporary. They were television actresses, really. Why, did they need a license? They thought the company had taken care of that. It was supposed to be a very old and established company, or so their booking agent had said. And this was real quality candy. They'd never have touched it if they'd thought otherwise.

It was a pleasure to watch them, alarm in their big wide eyes and their cupid's-bow lips framing words, but he had to get on with it.

"No, no," he said. "I'm sure it's legitimate." I took one myself, he wanted to say. "What I mean is, how often have you been on this street and when?"

They turned to each other and began to figure out when the car had picked them up and the stop to the photographers and the stop at the home office and the trip to the West Side and then here . . . The Lieutenant waited patiently. When they were that good-looking, he didn't mind waiting.

At last they had it. They'd been

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here twice, at nine this morning and now at one. How long had they stayed? A half hour or so each time—it took that long to give out the candy. They weren't supposed to just hand them out—they were supposed to smile and pirouette a bit so that people could get a good look at the new candy name across their chests.

"You're sure it was about half an hour this morning?"

"More or less," the redheaded one said.

"They were really going for that candy, hm?"

"Just the way you did," the blonde one said.

"It better be good or you girls are going up the river," he said with a wink. He got out his book and took their names and the names of their agent and watched them go bubbling into the store. Then he checked with Correll and the other cop and they said that half an hour was about right. From one o'clock they'd been busy keeping the crowd from spilling over to the street and getting themselves killed—people would do anything for a free sample. The Lieutenant knew this was where he had come in and went down the street to Powers.

"Why didn't you mention about those people up there?" he said.

"Those babes giving out samples? You didn't ask."

That was no answer—not from a guy who was supposed to be studying law nights.

"But they were around at nine and stayed for half an hour. If the street was the way it was a minute ago, it was a ghost town from here clear up to that sporting goods store. That means if somebody came running out of Martin's at nine fifteen, the way Martin said, you'd have seen him. Unless you were asleep on your feet."

Powers flushed. "I guess it was kind of quiet then, Lieutenant, but nobody came by here. I'd have noticed."

"Nobody?"

"Well, maybe an old lady. But nobody who looked like he'd just knocked off that salesman."

The killer would have had to hurry. There was the store owner in back and the killer would be afraid he'd come running out after him. He'd be running, all right—he wouldn't have played the innocent tourist. Yet Powers said he hadn't seen him.

The Lieutenant went back to Martin's. The owner was wrapping a pair of binoculars for a Marine. He told a lady not to pull the pearl necklace apart, showed a man some novelty clocks, and joined the Lieutenant near the back. "Well, after all," he said, "Was I going to twiddle my thumbs all day?"

"I didn't say anything." The Lieutenant took up a pair of binoculars and peered at the wall. Not bad. They brought you up closer but were made so cheaply they almost crumpled in your hand. He

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put down the binoculars, hoping the customers would leave soon. It was too hot to push them. Then he thought of something and went past Martin into the back. It was just a storeroom with a few chairs and a barred window.

"No door?" he said.

"No door," said Martin.

"You and Harris were alone when this fellow came in?"

"Yes. I told you all that before. Now can I get back to work?"

"Well, not just yet. Not for a while." The Lieutenant began to move the customers out of the store.

"What are you talking about?" Martin said nervously. "Is it too much to ask what you're talking about?"

The Lieutenant shooed out the last of the customers. Some of them had been indignant—they hadn't liked being deprived of the opportunity to be gypped. He shut the door in their faces.

"You said the murder was at nine fifteen?"

"That's right. That's when we open. And as soon as I saw George was dead I called the police."

"But you didn't run out after the murderer?"

"Out there? You know what it's like here around nine." Martin laughed. "It's mobbed, mobbed. I wouldn't have been able to make my way to the cop on the corner."

"Usually," agreed the Lieutenant, "but today there was a diversion. Two pretty girls were giving away samples up the street along about then, so if you'd run out you'd have had no trouble spotting your man. The street in front of your store was completely empty at nine fifteen."

Martin scowled. "How was I to know that?"

"Still you might have been angry enough to poke your head out the door," the Lieutenant said thoughtfully. "But no matter. We know that nobody came running or walking out of this place at nine fifteen."

Martin sat down now, watching him. "How do you make that out?"

"The street out front was deserted. The cop on the beat saw nobody running or walking—nobody. And anybody who'd shot Harris would run out of here like his shirt was on fire—he knew he'd left you behind to raise the alarm. But the outside saw nobody."

"All I know is what happened in this store," Martin said slowly. "What happened outside isn't my concern."

"What *did* happen in this store, Mr. Martin?" the Lieutenant said evenly. "No, not the story you gave me before. What really happened?"

"You tell me," Martin said gruffly. "You seem to know more about it than I do."

"You killed Harris. It had to be you. There was no one else in the store."

"Why should I kill George?"

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"I was hoping you'd tell me that." The door opened and the Lieutenant said without turning, "Store's closed."

"Lieutenant," It was Powers.

"Stay at that door, Powers, and keep everybody out."

"Could I speak with you a moment first, Lieutenant?" He sounded worried and the Lieutenant went over to him.

"What's up?"

"About this morning, Lieutenant." Powers hesitated.

"What about this morning?" the Lieutenant clipped.

"Well, I ducked into a drug store on the corner. But only for a minute," Powers said hastily as the Lieutenant began to look grim. "I called to find out my law grades."

"What time?" the Lieutenant said ominously.

"About nine fifteen," Powers said with a nervous laugh.

The Lieutenant stared back at him coldly and Powers stopped laughing.

"How long were you in the drug store?"

"Oh, three or four minutes."

"Great work, Powers," the Lieutenant said stonily. "I had this all wrapped up. All you had to do was be at your post daydreaming as usual and I'd have nailed this guy. But no, you're in a drug store. You know what the Manual says about leaving your post?"

Powers knew. But he'd been dying to know his grades—

The Lieutenant cut him short and in a low suppressed voice delivered a tongue-lashing. Powers stood there and took it, his head bowed, until the door rattled and the Lieutenant growled, "Get out there and see if you're better at pushing people than you are at staying at your post."

Powers got out fast.

"Anything, Lieutenant?" said Martin, approaching.

The Lieutenant didn't answer. He leaned his elbows against the counter and stared gloomily out at the street. What now?

"Where's the gun, Martin?" he said finally, hoping that he didn't sound as discouraged as he felt.

"You don't want much, do you?" Martin said lightly.

The Lieutenant picked up the phone and called for people to help him look. They were to pinch off the street and check garbage and trash cans, try to intercept the trucks that were already on their way to the dump, and nose around gutters. Rooney was to come around and help check through the crates and boxes in the store and a man was to go out and check the back yard. When the Lieutenant hung up Martin was smoking a cigarette and looking skeptical.

"We'll find it, Martin. Guns are hard to get rid of, unless there's a river handy. You were in the store all day. You either tossed it in the garbage or out that window in back, or else it's still in the store."

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Martin smiled amiably. "You'll need that gun, officer. This business of free samples and an empty street don't add up to much. Not when you consider that George was practically a son to me. I took him in my house, what was mine was his. So why should I kill him?"

"One thing at a time," tht Lieutenant said briefly. Already he was taking down boxes and pulling off lids.

"Easy, easy, Lieutenant. I have to sell those things."

The Lieutenant had run through the top shelf by the time Rooney arrived. They opened boxes and crates, checked the storeroom from top to bottom, the little closet, the lavatory, the insides of the larger radios. Someone was stomping underneath the window in back and now and then a man popped in to report no progress on the garbage front.

It was heavy work and hot, even with the fan, and the Lieutenant sat down to rest a minute. He opened the neck of his shirt and blew into it.

"You have a permit for a gun?" he asked Martin.

"No," Martin said with relish.

"Did Harris?"

"Not that I know of."

The Lieutenant instructed Rooney to check the registrations. Then he started on the last row of boxes. They held bronze-plating kits, the kind used to immortalize baby's shoes. The boxes were flat and narrow and it wasn't likely a .32 was there, but the Lieutenant looked anyway. As he flashed through them, flinging lids off, banging them on, pushing them aside, he felt a curious moisture on his thumb. He looked; it was a kind of bronze paint.

"Hey, can I get this stuff off?" he said sourly, reaching for a handkerchief. And then he wondered where it had come from—he'd seen no broken bottles.

He reached back through the boxes and found it; it wasn't broken, it was lightly closed. A smear of bronze curled around the neck. He picked up the bottle and held it up. Two-thirds full. He stared at it and then turned his head. Martin was looking bleakly into his eyes.

"Mr. Martin, I have a thought. Will you tell me if I'm right?"

Martin said nothing, just watched him anxiously.

"After you shot George you got out a bottle of this stuff and bronzed the gun. Then when it dried you sold it as a souvenir. Right?"

"No," Martin said huskily. "No."

"Forgive me if I don't take your word for it. We'll just put an item in the paper asking whoever bought the gun to come forward."

Martin looked tired and sweaty. "Everybody doesn't read the paper. And nobody's going to want to get involved—you know that, Lieutenant. They'll throw it into the river. If it's as you say," he added.

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The Lieutenant studied the bottle between his thumb and forefinger. "You certainly got value from that gun. Bump off your help and then sell it as a souvenir."

"It's not going to be easy to prove any of that, Lieutenant." Martin stood up now and began putting covers back on the cartons. He looked very sure of himself.

"Hey."

They turned. A man in a red blazer was standing framed in the doorway.

"What kind of a gyp is this? This thing is supposed to be genuine bronze and it's started to chip already. What kind of a deal you handing me?"

The Lieutenant was across the floor in three strides and taking the gun from his hand. A .32, all right. From behind he heard a sigh. Martin had sat down. The bronze was applied thinly and the blue gun-metal had begun to show through.

"How could you, Mr. Martin?" chided the Lieutenant. "Going light on the bronze at a time like that?"

Martin said nothing.

"Just can't help gypping people, can you?" The Lieutenant wrapped the revolver carefully as Rooney led the man in the blazer outside for a talk. "Now why'd you kill him?"

Martin began to talk, slowly and monotonously, about this snake in the grass he'd taken into his house, who'd eaten his food and worn his clothes, who'd carried on with his daughter right under his eyes and then left her to become engaged to someone else. His daughter's life was ruined and that snake in the grass just laughed.

And so poor George had sold his last cheap radio, thought the Lieutenant. So had his boss. But there would be others to take their place. Many others. He took Martin by the arm and went out into the street that was now swarming with people . . .

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a new story by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **MARJORIE CARLETON**

TITLE: ***I.O.U.— One Life***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: George Potts, pharmacist

LOCALES: Edgeville and Boston

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Another distinguished story by Marjorie Carleton—sensitive in its telling and three-dimensional in its characters . . .*

THE TRAIN WHISTLED PETULANTly at the three passengers running down the ramp. But it waited, for these days the 11:08 was the only morning train to Boston.

George Potts, proprietor of the Edgeville Pharmacy, lowered his paper and watched from his seat by the car window. He was playing hookey from the drug store for the first time in twenty-five years, so everything about the week-day morning was slightly outsized and tinged with importance. The first two late-comers were the Henty sisters, schoolteachers. Bel-Ans and incredible quantities of Alka-Seltzer. He suspected that they drank on week-ends. But who wouldn't, teaching school in Edgeville?

His tolerant glance hurried by them and fastened on the third late-comer, Mattie Blanchard. She had changed a lot recently, though she was only fifty-one, a year younger than George. For decades she had maintained the slim little figure, the round rosy little face. Now, almost overnight, the figure had blurred, the face had become drawn and worried. Of course, George admitted, Nick Blanchard was a terrible loud-mouth. Still, she had put up with him for a quarter of a century, so more likely it was just physical—her time of life.

But George was sad about it because she had been the prettiest girl in town and he had been a little in love with her, though he had married someone else. He was a

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widower now, with no romantic yearnings; but Mattie had been part of his youth. She was still part of it in a way, since he had bought her father's drug store when Mr. Stanley retired. Perhaps in those days George had hoped he was taking over Mattie too. But it hadn't happened. The pharmacy was his whole life now, and Mattie just a small ghost flickering around its edges.

After a while he rose ponderously and walked down the aisle toward her. They had known each other since they were children but he could see he wasn't welcome now—her face had turned toward the window. It didn't stop George Potts. He reversed the empty seat in front of her and sat down.

"Hi, Mattie."

"Oh, hello, George. How are you? How's your daughter?"

"Fine."

"When you going to be a grandpa? Nice big girl like your Elsie ought to have half a dozen."

"She can't have any," he said.

"That so? I'm sorry." She didn't look sorry. She was wearing what George always thought of as "Mattie's selfish face"—turned inward, rejecting. He sighed to himself but picked up her casual tone.

"Doing some last-minute shopping?"

"No—doctor's appointment."

"Lotion didn't help the rash?"

"Not much." She glanced down at her gloved wrist. "But I'm not seeing him about that. Anyway, what does a gynecologist know about dermatology? Dad's lotion would have cleared it up in twelve hours."

George nodded admiringly. "I remember Mr. Stanley always had a run on that special of his, particularly during summer camp season—impetigo and all that. He'd have such a rush you'd always have to chase down there and help him." His eyes twinkled. "Maybe that's why I developed such a yen to own a pharmacy."

"Well, you have it now." Her tone was indifferent.

He persisted gallantly. "Seemed natural to see you bustling around the dispensary the other day when Jim was sick and I had to take over the fountain. Hey, that reminds me, you didn't leave the prescription on my desk."

For the first time she came alert. "Sorry, George." She began riffling through her purse, then looked up and smiled ruefully. "Must have mislaid it or left it at home. But just to keep you on the safe side, I'll get another prescription from Doctor Franz today and leave it with you on my way home."

"Just to make things look good," he agreed comfortably. "Things are different from what they were thirty years ago. Not that I say they're *better*—just different. Your pa could let you help in the dispensary then, without your having a degree and still a youngster. Now

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—the government has so many rules a man don't dare lose an aspirin. But are any fewer people killed? No. The hoodlums beat up the old punks, husbands go after their wives with guns, and wives—"

"Use rolling pins and skillets, as usual," Mattie said with a flicker of humor.

"As usual," George sighed. "Not a mite of progress . . . How's Nick these days? And when do you take off for warmer climes?"

Mattie swallowed, and he could see for the first time that she must have lost a molar recently, for the dimple in her left cheek had become a hollow. "Nick is more impossible than ever—if *that's* possible. But you knew him before I did, so that won't be any news."

He was soothing. "Change of scene does everyone good. Edgeville will miss you, but if you're going to pull up stakes, now's the time."

"That's just it. There isn't going to be any change of scene."

"But you're all set. You're all—"

"Organized? Exactly. That's what Nick loves. To have everything organized—and then to upset it. Gives him a real excuse for yelling."

She rattled on, looking at George but not seeing him. He had always been someone for her to talk at, saying anything that came into her head. Once he had been flattered to be made so familiar with her private thoughts—until he had realized it was not a compliment, that he was merely a sounding board, a mirror, a hassock to be used or kicked aside. It didn't hurt any longer—at least, not much.

". . . and our things are packed right down to the suitcases," she was saying with a hostility that embraced the whole fleeing landscape beyond the train windows. "The furniture is sold and is going to be picked up Monday. Transfer of the house deed only needs Nick's signature—I've already signed. Yet this morning, this very morning, Nick said to me that he wasn't sure we were smart giving up a good home in a place where everyone knows us! A place where everyone knows us—ha! I'll say they do. Never occurs to him that I'd give my right arm to live in a place where *no one* knows Nick." She paused and said almost inconsequentially, "Maybe then I could do some real yelling myself."

They were clattering over a bridge into Boston now. For an instant there was a glimpse of its gnarled, rose-brick fingers clutching the diminished hills, splaying into the Atlantic. Then they were hurtling toward the station.

George ventured, "Oh, Nick will come around. Probably just his digestion." He paused and added mildly, "You ought to be careful what he eats, Mattie. Real careful."

She checked the clasp on her purse. "He's a born glutton, but I'd better phone and tell him not to get

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into the mince pie." She flushed suddenly, as though for some reason she had been disconcerted by her own innocent remark. Then she blurted, "Anyway, I made it for the Ladies Aid Bazaar." Her mouth snapped shut; she glared at George as she would have glared at an impertinent questioner.

But he wasn't perturbed. He had known Mattie and her moods since she had been a five-year-old; and he could always find a compliment for her. "Real good of you," he approved, "particularly since your cupboards are all cleaned out. But give me apple every time. You never used to like mince either."

"Still don't," she said shortly. "But it's Nick's favorite, and anything for peace." Her tone dismissed a boresome culinary subject.

"Well, not anything," he qualified for her, smiling. "Got to draw the line somewheres." There was a little silence. She looked at him, making a visible effort to be sociable, even a bit coquettish.

"That's good, coming from you, George. You always get your way sooner or later."

"Not always. Not twenty-five years ago. But about Nick—with his type indigestion, it's not how *much* he eats but *what* he eats."

"Oh, so you're a doctor now as well as a pharmacist," she said coolly.

He chuckled. "Well, as the only druggist in Edgeville, I know a lot about the town's innards. Too much, sometimes . . . When is your appointment with Doctor Franz?"

"Two o'clock, but don't ask me to lunch with you, George, because I have a few errands."

"Just wanted to be sure Doc would be back at the office in time. I'm having lunch with him at one."

"You know Doctor Franz *personally?*" She wasn't cool any more.

"Sure do. We were in North Africa together."

"But he was a captain—"

"And I was a non-com. Yep. But I was able to do him a little favor once and—well, we see each other once or twice a year."

"I suppose the little favor was the one that earned you the medal—and the limp," Mattie said softly. Then her voice changed suddenly. "But I don't want you two he-men discussing me. Understand?"

"Now, Mattie, doctors don't talk about their patients." Though this time will be an exception, he added to himself. It almost seemed that she had read his thoughts, for her color was high and for an instant she was the young, imperious, beautiful Mattie Stanley.

"Don't you even dare mention my name, George Potts!" Fortunately he didn't have to answer that, for the train had jolted to a stop. Mattie pulled her coat around her and marched down the aisle without a backward look or a goodbye.

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Well, George reflected unhappily, it wasn't a goodbye. He was very much afraid he would have to see Mattie again, and soon. In the meantime, perhaps he had given her something to think about.

He had. In the station she went directly to a phone booth and dialed the house. Nick would almost certainly be there because he hated to eat out, even for lunch. The loud, hectoring voice answered and she said instantly, "Nick, I called about your lunch."

"I'm just fixing it."

"But I forgot to tell you not to touch the mince pie. Have an apple or banana instead."

"I'd rather have the pie."

"Nick, I'm taking it over to the Ladies Aid Bazaar later today. If you eat it, I'll have to buy one for them. You want me to spend a dollar and a half on a boughten pie?"

"Well, all right."

"Nick, *promise* not to touch it?"

"I just said I won't. What'd the doctor say?"

"Pity's sake, I just landed in the station."

"Mattie, I wish I'd told you something this morning before you left in such a huff and puff."

"You told me plenty."

"But you didn't give me time to finish—you just beat it out the door. I was sort of—well, I have a surprise for you, Mattie."

"I'll bet! One more of your surprises will finish me. It might finish you too."

"Please listen—" The argumentative voice blundered along, gathering a few more decibels. Mattie held the receiver at a distance from her ear. But she listened. Suddenly she forgot Nick as her eyes widened and her free hand pressed against her midriff. The disturbance was unmistakable.

"I'll be right home," she whispered.

Dr. Franz pushed his coffee cup away. "Damn it, George, you could lose your license for this. Letting a layman mess around in the dispensary." He shook his head.

"I know," George said unhappily, "but can't you see how natural it was to let her do it? Why, Doc, while I was still studying for my degree, she was helping her father in the pharmacy, measuring, weighing—all the rest. I was only getting theory while she was getting the real know-how."

"She knew your fountain boy was down with flu."

"Everyone knew it."

"And she'd know that three thirty in the afternoon was your busiest time, what with the High School letting out and shoppers coming in. She'd know it would be a good time to offer to put up the lotion herself. And if you *hadn't* been busy that afternoon, George, she'd have waited." Mr. Potts didn't say anything and the doctor went on abruptly, "What made you think of the arsenic?"

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"When I looked for the prescription she ought to have left—and couldn't find it. But she'd said it was a lotion for a rash on her wrist. And that made me think of the special prescription her pa used to make up. Besides, if it wasn't a serious rash, you'd probably recommend a good proprietary. If you thought it might be serious, you'd send her to a dermatologist."

Dr. Franz said unsmilingly, "George, stop figuring what I or my colleagues would do. You're not a physician." He relented. "Anyway, we ran into some rather weird skin diseases in Africa, as you ought to remember. But what about the arsenic?"

"Well, like I said, I got to thinking about her pa's lotion. I still have his files, so I looked it up and it did call for potassium arsenite. He called it 'Stanley's Special' but basically it was just Fowler's Solution—a sort of weak version with a frill or two added. So I checked supplies and sure enough—three grains of potassium arsenite was missing."

Dr. Franz thought that over. "About enough to cover a dime. You'd have to be looking for it, wouldn't you?"

George nodded. "Yep. But it comes one-eighth of an ounce to the bottle—and sealed. The seal was broken. Ought to have been a bit over fifty-four and a half grains in that bottle. It was three grains short."

Dr. Franz rubbed his chin and finally said, "You're jumping to a lot of conclusions about my patient. What makes you think the prescription *didn't* call for arsenic? Since," he added with deceptive mildness, "you didn't even ask to see it before you turned her loose."

George turned red but his voice remained defiant. "Okay, but a pharmacist does know a few things, Doc. Who prescribes that stuff these days? In two years I've only had three calls for it—one of 'em from a dentist who must have blown the cobwebs off an old Manual." He was warming up now. "I don't believe your prescription called for it. In fact, I'm wondering if you wrote her a lotion prescription at all!"

In a sudden reversal of tone Dr. Franz said lightly, "I must consult counsel. At the moment, the only proven crime is yours, George. You permitted a layman to use your dispensary. You've mislaid a certain amount of potassium arsenite. Also, there's your negligence. Now you're asking me to see a connection between these things—at the expense of my patient. And solely on the grounds that you think she's fed up with her husband—a very biased conclusion which you have no way of proving—and a bit suspect, in view of the fact that she turned you down once."

George was visibly deflated. "Sorry I said anything, Captain."

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"Nonsense, Sergeant. I was just indulging in a bit of relaxing sadism before returning to my ladies, bless their pelvic little hearts. Of course you should have told me. Equally, I had to chew you out. Now let's forget it. What's wrong with this fellow Blanchard, anyway?"

"Nothing a woman could take to court," George admitted. "That's the trouble. He's a good provider—on the thrifty side, maybe, but then so is Mattie. He's never looked at another woman. Don't smoke or drink," he added reluctantly.

"There must be *something*." Dr. Franz was impatient.

"Look, Doc, he's just a complete stinker to live with. Always making scenes about nothing at all, throwing tantrums like a three-year-old. And he's got one of those noisy quarrelsome voices like a foghorn. Men won't play golf or bridge with him—"

"Ah-ha!"

"—and they'd never get invited anywhere if the women weren't sorry for Mattie. And he always picks a fight or argues or gets slighted about something and stalks out. I bet Nick has broken up more picnics and parties than anyone in Edgeville except the Fire Department. He hasn't a solitary friend but it doesn't bother him. He'd rather enjoy his tantrums."

"Why'd she ever marry him?"

"He's still one of the handsomest male critters the Lord ever made." George sighed down at his paunch. "When Mattie married him she thought she could do something about his temper. I warned her but she said I was jealous—and I was." He threw out his hands. "I told you it was hard to explain unless you know Nick. Honest, Doc, I'd rather have a hyena for a pet myself. Or turning it the other way round, I'd rather have a wife who was unfaithful or alcoholic than one who nagged and shouted at me twenty-four hours of the day."

"Keep your wife pregnant and your liquor at the club," Dr. Franz murmured, then said quickly, "Sorry. The situation isn't funny. Lots of wives have been liquidated for nothing worse than incessant nagging—if there *is* anything worse. Now here's where I join the ranks of the unethical: we have a problem, George, aside from the fact that Blanchard may be ingesting a bit of arsenic with his meals. He may deserve it but we can't allow it to continue. That's point one. Point two is the fact that Mrs. Blanchard is pregnant—and I've always thought it unseemly for infants to be born while their mothers were in custody."

George's head shot up, his jaw dropped. "Pregnant? She's fifty-one and she's never had any children!"

"Unusual but not unheard-of," Dr. Franz assured him. "She doesn't know it yet." He glanced at his

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watch. "The official announcement takes place at two o'clock. I didn't dare tell her until the results of certain other tests had come through. If there was no chance of her coming to term—she had to know that too."

"Is there that chance?"

"A good one. I've had a couple of other opinions and they agree with mine—that she's in better shape physically than most women fifteen years younger. Her mental state is something else again and I'll admit she had me fooled. Seemed well-adjusted, didn't mention moving away from New England, spoke pleasantly enough of her husband. But you see the problem. We have to think of *three* people now."

He shrugged into his topcoat, signaled for the check. He grinned down at George. "A primipara at fifty-one! And she thinks *I* think it's menopause—"

"You should have told her." George's worry was even more obvious.

"You haven't minded your own business very well, so stop minding mine. I had good reasons for keeping mum until all the reports came in. Tell a woman her age that she's in a first pregnancy?—then turn around and tell her she'll never have the baby? Not I. Now I'll have really good news. So don't you upset the apple cart, George. I won't allow it. I'll throw you to the wolves if I have to."

George said flatly, "When you sail off the cloud, Doc, remember there's another little matter—some missing arsenic."

"Oh, yes, that reminds me. Surely you keep poisons under key?"

"Narcotics, but not the poisons," George said glumly. "And that's usual with most pharmacists, not a little notion of my own." He rose now too, and put on his coat. "You go have your big announcement scene but remember I've got to do something about Nick Blanchard's indigestion. I'll be at the store from six on. Will you call me? I'd kind of like to know what Mattie says about the baby *and* the arsenic," he added dryly.

Walking out of the restaurant he did not limp. It was painful not to limp but he managed it. Evidently it wasn't too convincing, for Dr. Franz poked his head from the taxi as it moved away and called back, "Better have someone take a look at those ingrowing toenails, Sergeant!"

George couldn't help grinning at the receding car. One foot would never have any toenails again. He had booted the grenade from the operating tent, but, unfortunately had tripped while pursuing it.

Now, a good many years later and watching the taxi disappear down Boylston Street, George rubbed his nose. At least, that was still there—the ample, alert Potts nose. His smile widened. Captain Franz was also still there, with his

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German name and his dyed-in-the-wool Vermont accent. He might not have been, so George's toes were a minor loss.

"George," Dr. Franz said over the telephone some hours later, "Mrs. Blanchard didn't show up for her two o'clock appointment."

"I know, Doc. I've been snooping around town. Seems Nick bought an Imperator Caravan two weeks ago. Chartreuse and black job, twenty-six thousand dollars. Sun deck, portable swimming pool—the works. He's been hiding it in his barn. Salesman told me he was planning a surprise for Mattie—it's their anniversary today."

"Very touching," Dr. Franz snarled.

"Well, they took off this afternoon but Mattie left a note at the store for me. Want I should read it to you? She says, 'Dear George, Nick really surprised me. We're leaving today to roam around the country in a trailer, of all things! Enclosed is house key. Please check doors and windows, we left in such a hurry. There's a note for you on kitchen table.'"

"You haven't been out there yet?" Dr. Franz asked sharply.

"No, I was waiting for your call."

"You can wait for *me*. I'll be there around nine, at your store. Blanchard may be traveling in a murder wagon and you're still in a bad spot, George. I wouldn't want you to walk into that house or touch anything without a witness."

"Okay, Doc. I'll be waiting."

The scent of beef stew was still new on the air, and the odor only pointed up the echoing rooms from which the last Blanchards had departed. Not that the furniture was gone as yet. But whatever had not been crated, had been shrouded. Plaster cupids leered coldly from the ceilings, fireplaces were bare and unfriendly. Only in the kitchen some sense of humanity still lingered: flowering plants on window sills; a battered alarm clock ticking as erratically as a battered heart.

There was a note on the counter, addressed to George. He opened it, pulled out a sheet of paper and a tiny folded packet. "That will be the potassium arsenite," he prophesied, unfolding the letter.

Mattie had written: "Dear George, I swiped some potassium arsenite but enclose same. Wouldn't want to get you in trouble if rules are stricter now. To tell the truth, I didn't see how I could put up with Nick any longer, so was going to kill myself. Then I suspected I was pregnant and now I'm sure of it, though *no* thanks to Dr. Franz. Between you and me, a gynecologist who doesn't know the difference between pregnancy and menopausal symptoms should have stuck to carving up G.I.'s, so I don't feel too bad about breaking appointment. Did try to phone but

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his line was busy and I had to catch 1:03 back to Edgeville. I'm so old the baby may not live, but its something to look forward to and I promise I'll never do anything silly again like the arsenic. Honest, George, you can believe me. Nick doesn't know about the baby yet—he'd have fits about taking me on caravan trip. You know how he goes to pieces if I even have a headache because after all I'm all he has. He's always been scared of everything and everybody, so it was really a big thing for him to plan the caravan surprise and I don't want to spoil it. Real estate man has General Delivery address in case of emergency. Yours, Mattie. P.S. Read and *burn*."

George handed the letter to Dr. Franz. He himself opened the packet very delicately and stirred its contents with the point of a pencil. Dr. Franz tossed the letter down with a snort. "I read it and I'm burning," he acknowledged. "Arsenic?"

"It's not gypsum." George refolded the packet, rinsed the pencil, and thrust it into the earth of the geranium on the sill. Then he washed his hands.

"You believe the letter?" Dr. Franz demanded.

"Why not?" George was shaken, though. It was one thing to put motive and opportunity together and come up with a shrewd guess. It was quite another thing to have that guess confirmed so baldly.

Dr. Franz had been bumped from his cloud too. "She's a reckless, irresponsible woman and I'm not sure *I* believe her—"

"And of course she's no longer your patient." George's face was innocent.

"That has nothing to do with it." The doctor paced the floor, his scowl formidable. "Arsenic is a murder weapon, painful, unpleasant. Definitely not a suicide choice. Why didn't she take one of the narcotics?"

"Locked up," George reminded him.

"Well, strychnine or cyanide then. Hell of a lot quicker. Wham!—and it's over."

"Sure, and with an autopsy following just as wham," George pointed out. "She wouldn't want Nick to know she'd killed herself. Or get him into trouble. And you can't die wham, without people asking questions. But arsenic—you can string that out. And at her age—and pregnant—well, she might have gotten away with it, without Nick or a strange doctor guessing a thing."

Dr. Franz said sourly, "Our lab routines are very thorough these days—"

"Rural doctors too?" But George went on very hastily, "Okay, Doc, okay. But Mattie took this stuff and returned it. So what do we do now? Have the police haul her back and put her in the jug for stealing it? Even if they believe her

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letter, there's the intent to commit suicide. That's a crime too, isn't it? Well, it's up to you to decide. I let her use the pharmacy, so I can't be on the jury."

The doctor's anger was cooling and he had turned hesitant. "You know her, George, I don't. You honestly think it was just a crazy suicide notion that she snapped out of?"

George shrugged. "Mattie's the kind who can do something wicked if she can do it quick. But she couldn't keep it up. She hasn't the meanness or the guts. She hasn't—" He groped helplessly.

"The cold malice of the slow poisoner?"

"That's it." George missed the sarcasm, or chose to ignore it. "Did you read that somewheres or make it up? Honest, Doc, I don't get you. Lunch today, you're beating my ears off. Only thing that matters, you say, is the baby. Now you're willing to believe anything about Mattie. But she's still having the baby, isn't she?"

He turned his back and walked across the wide expanse of kitchen floor to pull the window shades down again. His shoulders were very square but he limped heavily, blatantly. The doctor's mouth twitched as he observed that limp. Sooner or later a man has to pay; and there was no one so righteous as a sergeant for keeping the score. George was presenting the score now: To Captain Franz, one life. Please make payment to Martha Stanley Blanchard and family.

"Oh, hell," the doctor capitulated. "Why whip a dead horse?" It was, perhaps, an unfortunate figure of speech in the circumstances, but he didn't care. He was querulous, now that he had given in and authority was seeping from him. "I still don't like it."

"It's always sad to lose an interesting patient," George sympathized blandly, "especially if she kicks you in the face while saying goodbye. Especially if you're a physician *and* a captain."

"George, sometimes you're intolerable. Go to hell."

"Yes, sir, at once, sir."

But Mr. Potts did not immediately descend to the nether regions. After Dr. Franz had departed, he went around the Blanchard house checking doors and windows. Then he returned to the kitchen and paused there a moment. There was a small matter in the back of his mind.

Before supper he had dropped in to make a casual inquiry at the Ladies Aid Bazaar, with negative results. Now he sauntered out to the back porch. The rubbish pail held a few last odds and ends but the garbage container glistened pristinely. It was quite empty—except for a mince pie neatly wrapped in newspapers.

It was whole but it had suffered in transit. Mr. Potts thoughtfully removed it to his car. This time of

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year, no telling when there would be sudden hot weather; and the new owners weren't due until next week. Just a small neighborliness. Mattie set a lot of store by her housekeeping.

In the quiet back room of his pharmacy that night, he typed a laborious letter:

Dear Mattie, Am writing late from store where I been doing some food analysis for a friend. Happy about your good news. Checked house from attic right to garbage pail. All is okay now, though you forgot one or two things. Women mostly do when they go at things in a hurry. Take care of yourself, see doctors regular. Tell Nick to drop me post card at least once a month about his own health. Strong man like him shouldn't have indigestion, so I'll send out the bloodhounds if I don't hear from him often, ha, ha. Things are tough sometimes but all in all you been lucky, Mattie. You're pretty smart and mostly a good woman, but don't be so quick to think that doctors and pharmacists are dumb bunnies. Maybe we just care about you—like your pa did, and Dr. Franz, and

Yours truly, George Potts

He hesitated, then added grudgingly above his signature: "and Nick too." It spoiled the appearance of the letter but at least kept it truthful. Other things were spoiled also—the neatness of his dispensary, for one. Crumpled newspapers lay on the floor and the remains of a pie cluttered old Mr. Stanley's cherished marble counter. There was a faint odor from a cooling retort.

Mr. Potts rose from the desk and began to tidy up. A nursery rhyme popped into his head. "When the pie was opened, the birds began to sing—" So who knows how a pie will turn out? And babies are more important than a pie that was never eaten. Mattie scared easy—and for keeps. After that talk on the train, Nick was safe as a church. Mr. Potts had known that, still knew it. But Dr. Franz couldn't have been so sure.

George's analysis had shown a small but appreciable amount of arsenic in the pie. Not enough to kill a man or to turn a woman into a murderer. But enough to remove Mr. Potts's last romantic illusions—enough, perhaps, to make Mattie Blanchard as frightened and remorseful a wife as she would be a devoted mother.

The room was now immaculate again, but Mr. Potts still teetered on his heels, consulting his conscience.

Was it necessary to tell Dr. Franz the result of his tests? No. A sergeant has to make many quick decisions—in order to spare his superiors the mental and moral anguish for which their more delicate natures are not equipped. Otherwise, he is a very poor sergeant indeed.

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George locked up and left the pharmacy without giving it a backward glance. He was a dutiful man, but never obsessed by a duty after it had been discharged. His footsteps, despite the limp, marched down the night-silent street with a rhythm that had once been all too clearly familiar to the men of his platoon.

Behind him a faint but pervading blue light bloomed throughout the reaches of the drug store, warning all malefactors that George Potts, Pharmacist and Sergeant, would tolerate no nonsense—none whatever.

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★★★★ **THE SMARTEST GRAVE, *by R. J. White*** (Harper, $3.95)

Winner of recent English "Don's Crime Novel Competition" is one of the best modern fictionings of a celebrated true murder—in this case the Moat Farm affair of 1903.

★★★ **DIPLOMATIC DEATH, *by Charles Forsyte*** (Morrow, $2.95)

Weak on action, but a collector's item for connoisseurs of pure puzzle-making, recalling Christie or Queen in the 1930's.

★★★ **THE MURDERERS, *by Fredric Brown*** (Dutton, $2.95)

Nice observation of the lowest-level Hollywood, with adroit variations on the STRANGERS ON A TRAIN theme of murder-swapping.

★★★ **SOMETHING IN THE SHADOWS, *by Vin Packer*** (Gold Medal s1146, 35¢)

Consistently sensitive and intelligent crimewriter creates another terrible picture of murder in recognizable ordinary life.

★★★ **THE BLACK SHRIKE, *by Ian Stuart*** (Scribner's, $3.95)

Attractively wild thriller of mysterious islands, secret weapons and devious plots—like Ian Fleming without his sex-sadism excesses.

Sherlock Holmes devotees (and any others who welcome shrewd tales in the deductive manner) should acclaim August Derleth's THE REMINISCENCES OF SOLAR PONS (Mycroft & Moran, $3.50)—and should note for Christmas-giving THE BOYS' SHERLOCK HOLMES, admirably edited by Howard Haycraft (Harper, $3.95). Other important hardcover reissues: Mary Stewart's WILDFIRE AT MIDNIGHT (1956; Mill-Morrow, $3.50), Arthur W. Upfield's WINDS OF EVIL (1937; British Book Centre, $3.25) and especially Dylan Thomas' splendid and neglected version of the deeds of Burke and Hare, THE DOCTOR AND THE DEVILS (1953; New Directions, $3.75).

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In this issue we welcome another newcomer to the pages of EQMM —the well-known English mystery writer, Guy Cullingford—with the unusual and gripping story of a retired Civil Servant who had a passion for roses and who came upon something quite shocking in his garden . . .

MR. MOWBRAY'S PREDECESSOR

by GUY CULLINGFORD

MR. MOWBRAY'S SPADE, DEEP IN the ground, struck against something hard and glanced off it. He repeated the performance.

Immediately a cooing voice from the balcony next door called out, "Another of those dreadful stones! I warn you, Mr. Mowbray, these gardens are positive cemeteries."

Mr. Mowbray turned a frail but determined back and dug away stubbornly. He didn't want to be observed. It was his garden and his stone and he wanted to deal with it privately.

He dug round it patiently easing it out of the heavy clay. Then he bent down to take it out. When he saw what it was, he was glad he had his back to his inquisitive neighbor. He stood there holding the skull between his long, narrow hands in a state of mused bewilderment.

His next thought was that he wanted to get rid of it at once. Guarding it from sight, he stepped onto the garden path and plunged the skull's jaw into the undergrowth of a japonica trained against the fence. The skull's dome, rounded and brown with age, still protruded, looking like a large pebbled flint.

"So that was what was the matter with that rose" remarked his neighbor, Mrs. Gudgeon, in her pigeon tones. "I wondered why it never did any good. It stuck out like a sore thumb with the rest of them bearing so marvelously. The previous owner was crazy about his roses. I expect you're equally fond of them, aren't you, Mr. Mowbray?"

"I like them, yes," said Mr. Mowbray stiffly. Never would he admit to this irritating woman, who looked like a pouter pigeon as well as sounded like one, that the rosebushes were his chief reason for buying the house.

Mr. Mowbray was a quiet, shy, retired Civil Servant who had just moved in here after the death of his wife. Now that he was alone, he only wanted a small place which could be managed for him by a daily woman while he pottered about in the garden to his heart's

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content. But the actual finding of the house and the buying of it had been done for him by his wife's brother, who regarded Mr. Mowbray as a complete muddlehead to whom he had a duty because of their relationship.

Mr. Mowbray had only to come and approve and that he did, as soon as he saw the roses. The garden was the usual suburban type, the size of a pocket handkerchief, but the roses were all expensive varieties and quite superb. Neither the brother-in-law or Mr. Mowbray had seen Mrs. Gudgeon, who had happened to be out for the day when they made their tour of inspection. They only noted that her garden was kept in perfect order and thus unlikely to distribute the seeds of weeds over the party boundary . . .

"Such a beautiful afternoon," sighed Mrs. Gudgeon, rapturously sniffing at the rose scent. "It makes one think of being young and in love."

"Yes, well, I must be getting in to my tea," said Mr. Mowbray.

He beat a retreat through the open French windows into his sitting room where he knew the tea-trolley was all laid up for him by the faithful Mrs. Harris. But as he boiled his own kettle, the good lady having now departed, he felt his knees trembling. And when he had sipped his first cup of tea, he found that he had small appetite for the delicate cucumber sandwiches, the currant bread, the sultana cake—he was still thinking about that dreadful skull he had disinterred.

Mr. Mowbray, for all his wool-gathering and timidity, was not a fool. He didn't for one moment imagine that he had stumbled on a fact of archeological significance. The skull, though it had obviously been there for some time, was no relic of antiquity. It was buried at no great depth either, though probably as far as one could get in that iron-hard ground so magnificently suited to the raising of roses.

Though he had found it at the roots of the standard, he didn't assume that it was necessarily the cause of that bush's decline. What he had been seeking—and still believed responsible—was something alive, not something dead: some scallywag of the soil, some gardener's pest. Though how such a denizen could survive in an intensively cultivated garden where every rose that blew testified to meticulous care and feeding . . .

Mr. Mowbray suddenly put down a half-bitten sandwich and pushed the tea-trolley away with his foot. A shocking idea had just occurred to him. Gradually the universe steadied and he resumed his meditations on the skull itself.

Skulls have a tendency to be regarded as isolated objects—to wit, the Piltdown skull, the Neanderthal skull, and on a lower plane, "The Screaming Skull." But it is

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generally recognized that, however much they may have become disassociated, they were originally teamed up with such things as a spinal column, shoulder blades, ribs, and all those bony parts that go to make the complete skeleton.

A different man from Mr. Mowbray would have buried that skull straight back into his garden again, heeled it in hard, and then gone round to the local for a pint of beer to wash it out of his imagination. But Mr. Mowbray, with his Civil Service background, had to have all his information complete, docketed, and neatly tabulated, before he could close his file on it.

As he was washing up his solitary tea cup and drying it thoroughly, he was already deciding on what he had to do and the best time to set about it without interference.

Mrs. Gudgeon had no sooner withdrawn into her own premises for her regular television session which started each evening at seven o'clock (she had already coyly suggested Mr. Mowbray's participation in this rite) than he went into the garden armed with a large wicker basket. His spade was still stuck in the ground, which was a sign that he had been greatly upset, or he would never have abandoned it in this fashion.

He rolled up his shirt sleeves and began to dig in a steady, unhurried way, just like a professional gardener. At last he had dug a trench a little less than the size of a coffin. In doing this he had displaced one other rosebush and a quantity of annuals. But in his basket he now had, besides the skull, a fine selection of assorted bones.

When he was satisfied that the job was completed, he filled in the trench again, replanting what he had taken up. By this time it was past ten and dark. He cleaned his spade, put it away in the tool shed, and went wearily into the house. There he made a package of what he had discovered, neatly labeled it: *Remains found in the garden of 56, Acacia Avenue,* dated it, and stored it carefully away in a wardrobe in his bedroom. Then he had a long drink of water, and full of aches and pains went to bed.

But not to sleep.

Perhaps it was the proximity of these graveyard items, perhaps it was simply the nagging of his conscience. Mr. Mowbray's plain duty at this point was to report his findings to the police. But between plain duty and the dictates of expediency there was a great gulf.

He had always looked forward to this period of retirement as the haven of his life. He had been tricked at the outset by his wife's death; then there had been the upheaval of the move, with all its attendant stress and strain. Then the process of settling down in new surroundings. Now all he wanted was to be left in peace.

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But if he informed the police, what would happen? Immediately the garden would become full of diggers, and he would be badgered and tormented beyond endurance. Obviously he wouldn't himself be a suspect, but someone would. The hue and cry would be on. Press and public would invade the privacy of his home. A trial might follow . . . Anticipation sent him into a sweat. What was more he could never escape. He would never be able to sell the house and move away—there was a popular prejudice against places where such things had happened. And what good would it do that poor package of bones?

No, his best plan was to keep his own counsel. He had a vision of himself in the witness box and the very thought sent cold shudders down his spine. To think that he had been made a victim of these circumstances, he who had never put a wrong foot forward in the whole of his blameless life!

A slow, smoldering rage against the man who had done this to him filled his mind, almost supplanting his conception of him as a murderer. Before he fell into a fitful slumber, he had made his decision rightly or wrongly; it only remained to abide by it.

But his nature had been formed by his vocation and he could no more let the matter rest than he could take the obvious way out of his dilemma. He pottered about in his domain as before, weeding the path, mowing the lawn, snipping off the dead heads of the roses under the bright bird's-eye of Mrs. Gudgeon—but all the joy had gone out of it. The profusion of roses which had been his especial delight now became the source of his deepest dread.

At the end of the week he started digging again. He had reached the pitch where he simply had to know one way or the other.

He went to the other end of the border where he had made his original discovery. A sort of recklessness drove him to it while Mrs. Gudgeon was still out on her balcony. He could well have waited until she had gone in, but she seemed to be dozing in her deck chair, and he wasn't sorry for a little human companionship at a slight remove from the scene of his operations. He thought it might fortify him against any further shocks.

But by and by he became engrossed in what he was doing. Just as he bent down to examine what appeared to be the complete bony structure of a leg encased in the hard ground, Mrs. Gudgeon spoke, nearly making him jump out of his skin.

"Mr. Mowbray, I thought autumn was the right time for deep digging."

He shot up and turned to face her, his long hands dangling.

"But there," she said cooing.

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"You take after your predecessor for that. He never could let well enough alone. Him and his trenches! I used to tease him about it. You must have found the tool shed full of sacks."

"Sacks," repeated Mr. Mowbray stupidly.

"Beech mast, bone manure, artificial fertilizer—all that sort of stuff. Great sacks of it he used to hump about. To my mind there's nothing like the real article. I get a load delivered from the stables once a year and old Bunch digs it in."

"Quite," said Mr. Mowbray. He couldn't think of a more adequate answer.

"Wouldn't you like to take a breather and let me fix you a nice refreshing drink with lots of ice?"

"Thanks," said Mr. Mowbray gruffly. "But I never think it wise to drink when one is overheated. I am going in now to cool down."

At which he vanished into his house, only returning to take up his labors when he knew she had gone in to her television and had drawn the curtains so that she might view the screen better.

During the weeks that followed, Mr. Mowbray set to work to investigate every inch of his flower beds with a thoroughness that was no disgrace to his previous calling—and always under the observation of his inquisitive neighbor. Altogether, he found that he was harboring six corpses—or rather, their skeletons.

After the first two he no longer took them indoors; he didn't have sufficient room for them.

He had no technical knowledge, so he didn't even know if they were male or female. Sometimes he wondered wildly who they all were, and once if they included the late lamented Gudgeon. That, he thought, would have been a merciful release. But he put the idea aside as unwarranted. He saw clearly now how it had all been done without Mrs. Gudgeon suspecting anything. Careful timing and sufficient audacity had carried the day.

By this time Mr. Mowbray was in a highly nervous state. He was a friendless man, having no one in whom he could confide. The solicitous Mrs. Harris was worried because he ate so little; she believed he was grieving for his wife. But his further discoveries had led Mr. Mowbray no nearer to ringing up the local police station. Indeed, they had hardened his resolution to maintain his secrecy. Now it would be a *cause célèbre* . . . one skeleton might pass almost unnoticed but six skeletons would rock the newspaper world. He could not, he would not, be associated with it.

When he was filling in the last trench, Mrs. Gudgeon leaned over her balcony rail and sighed softly. "Mr. Mowbray, you work too hard, really you do. Why don't you relax a bit? The roses are nearly over

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and you haven't visited me once. Your predecessor was always popping over for a little drink and a comfortable chat."

"What sort of man was he?" asked Mr. Mowbray harshly. The words were torn out of him.

Mrs. Gudgeon looked surprised. She studied him carefully. "Why!" she cooed after a moment's consideration. "He was very like you in a number of ways. Perhaps that's why I felt drawn to you right from the start. But of course I knew him better. We both came to these houses when they were first built. He was a quiet, retiring sort of man, a confirmed bachelor."

"Just as I am a confirmed widower," said Mr. Mowbray pointedly.

"And I am a confirmed widow," said Mrs. Gudgeon with a soft laugh. "But that need not prevent us seeking a little happiness together. He and I had some very happy times."

"If he was so happy here," said Mr. Mowbray savagely, "why did he have to leave?"

"He said it was simply that he wanted a larger garden."

Mr. Mowbray gave her one agonized stare and tore into his house, leaving Mrs. Gudgeon to ponder on the vagaries of men.

This put a very different complexion on things. The next day Mr. Mowbray marched straight off to see his brother-in-law.

"Look here," he said in an agitated manner "what was the name of the chap who sold you my house and where can I get in touch with him?"

"I dealt with him through the agent. But his name is Gaunt and he told me he was moving to a house in Redesdale Avenue. I remember the number was thirteen because we were laughing at it and he hoped it wasn't a bad omen. I told him to change it to 12A like they do in hotels. Why, has anything gone wrong?"

"I want to see him, that's all."

"House isn't tumbling down, I trust? It shouldn't be. The architect's report was very favorable for a house of that age."

"What age is it?"

"Just over twenty years."

Mr. Mowbray did a hasty division of six into twenty. That worked out at one every third year approximately. There might still be time.

"What's the trouble?"

"Oh, there's something I want to ask him. Mainly about the garden."

Even here Mr. Mowbray couldn't tell a lie.

"If that's all, you'll find him quite a pleasant chap. I should think he could be awkward if he wanted to be. Deep, you know. Doesn't say much. Why don't you ask him round and discuss it over a drink. You'll find his number in the telephone book. Shall I get Miss Jones to look it up for you?"

"No, thanks, I can do it myself,"

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said Mr. Mowbray. His brother-in-law's attitude to him as a high-grade mental defective always irritated him. Now it effectively prevented him from taking him into his confidence, an idea which had appeared possible when he started.

On reaching home, he rang up Gaunt at once, before he had time to lose his nerve. Gaunt sounded puzzled but agreed to come round that evening. Then Mr. Mowbray sat down to think how he was going to handle the situation.

By the time Gaunt was due to arrive, his expectant host was as jumpy as a cat. He kept on walking up and down the room, picking things up and replacing them. As he hadn't any other weapon of self-defense, he put the poker in readiness in the fireplace. When he straightened up from doing this, his face confronted him in the oval mirror, and he saw that it was wild and haggard.

But was that anything to wonder at? After all, the stoutest heart might quail at the idea of trying one's strength with a multiple murderer. At the same time, Mr. Mowbray thought that he had the upper hand. Mr. Gaunt couldn't know that the buyer of his small estate was constitutionally incapable of facing a scandal of these dimensions; he couldn't know that, whatever happened, Mr. Mowbray would rather end his own life than see it linked with the public fate of a homicidal lunatic.

In his own way, Mr. Mowbray had justified to himself the action he proposed to take. This garden had only a certain area and, because of the clay, only a certain depth. When a file was full, it was full and would hold nothing more. So with the garden. If Mr. Gaunt could be reinstated where he belonged, any prospective victim would be safe. There just wouldn't be any more room. It meant, of course, that Mr. Mowbray must move out and find somewhere else to live, but this was inescapable. At least, he would have his money back to spend again and this time he would make sure that he had no corpses at home and no widow next door.

The doorbell rang. Mr. Mowbray felt suddenly sick with fear. Yet when he opened the door to Mr. Gaunt, he found him, to his surprise, but as Mrs. Gudgeon had said, a man very much of his own stamp, complete to the horn-rimmed eyeglasses.

With his long hands all a-tremble, he filled Mr. Gaunt's glass with the sherry put there in the decanter by Mrs. Harris before she left. Mr. Gaunt took it from the tray and sat down in an easy chair, looking out into the garden but saying nothing. It was Mr. Mowbray's party, let him open the ball.

Mr. Mowbray, still standing up, took a great gulp of wine to steady himself and then blurted out in an excited voice, "I've been thinking

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about it and there's only one thing to be done. You'll have to buy the house back from me."

His visitor sat motionless. A shaft from the late afternoon sun glinted on his spectacles, giving him a most malign appearance.

"My dear chap," he said. "You must be mad. Why the hell should I?"

"You know perfectly well why," said Mr. Mowbray in a furious squeak.

"What's wrong with the house? Dry rot? Damp patches?"

"It's nothing like that."

"I only asked a fair price. I didn't overcharge you."

"It's not the house at all. You see, I've found out what's wrong with the garden."

There was an ominous silence which seemed to Mr. Mowbray to stretch into eternity.

At last Gaunt spoke, "So that's all you're grumbling about." He paused again, the sun glinting on his spectacles as before. Then he said slowly and deliberately, "I don't see what you've got to complain of. You've got the best show of roses in the neighborhood."

There is a limit to the self-absorption of any man, even a retired Civil Servant. The dreadful callousness of this remark cut right through the layers of dessication and laid bare what remained of Mr. Mowbray's soul. All along, it had nagged and reproached him, and now the implied association of those exquisite roses with the hideous nature of their fertilizer was more than a man could take.

It was the mock of beauty. It was the defeat of decency. It was the supreme insult to humanity. And worse than that, it was the exposure of his own weakness carried to its logical conclusion and made manifest to him by a murderer.

At that moment Mr. Mowbray hated himself as much as his visitor. His whole being craved for a belated justice. Discretion forsook him utterly, and out of his loathing and horror he spat two obscene words he didn't even know he knew.

There was another silence as fright bore down on him relentlessly.

"You mean me?" asked Mr. Gaunt in a new and deadly way.

"Yes, you! You!" Mr. Mowbray screamed defiantly, bordering on hysteria.

"Now I know you're crazy. To say such things to a man with my record." Gaunt's voice was quiet, almost sad. "Well, there's only one answer to that."

He planted his hands on the arms of the chair to lever himself up. Mr. Mowbray saw them there, powerful and crablike, and momentarily mesmerized, he sensed them already round his throat, squeezing and throttling . . .

Unless he acted at once he believed his fate was upon him—the same fate of the six others.

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Something snapped in Mr. Mowbray's tortured and tormented brain. He dashed to the fireplace, bent down, seized the poker, and swung it with a wild abandon at Gaunt's head. It struck him on the right temple.

Mr. Gaunt continued to sit in the easy chair, saying nothing at all, which was surprising as his glasses were shattered and only the frame clung precariously to the tip of his nose. His eyes, now that they were rid of their disguise, had a mild blank look. He seemed so unchanged that for a long time Mr. Mowbray couldn't believe that he was dead. Then Mr. Mowbray went to retrieve the glasses, and Gaunt's head fell forward and slumped on his chest, though the body remained supported by the elbows resting on the arm of the chair.

Mr. Mowbray picked up the poker which was a little bloodied at the tip and went out to wash it under the scullery tap. When he came back he was crying and muttering. "Got what he deserved—a dose of his own medicine—he did it to others, now it's his turn."

After a while he grew calmer and drank two glasses of sherry to steady his nerves. He knew exactly what he had to do. It was just as if someone had written out a set of instructions for him. He only had to follow them exactly and everything would be all right.

He went round to the tool shed and fetched one of those very large sacks of which Mrs. Gudgeon had spoken. They were folded and piled neatly on the cement floor.

Into this, with infinite difficulty, he introduced the unhelpful figure of his recent guest. It was a good thing Mr. Gaunt was small and slight. Even so, it was an awesome task.

Leaving Mr. Gaunt to his own company, he then went into the garden with his spade and began to open up the trench he had filled in only yesterday. It wasn't so difficult as the first time, because the soil had been loosened by the previous digging. A hasty glance at Mrs. Gudgeon's window had assured him that his neighbor was safely behind closed curtains, happily inhabiting a make-believe world measuring seventeen inches.

But Mr. Mowbray was a creature of habit; he was becoming used to his excavations, and even in these special circumstances, custom dulled him like an opiate. He dug steadily on. The newcomer would have to go on top of his earlier victim. No matter, there would still be room.

It was dark when he finished the grave. He went back into the house to fetch the sack. The dead-weight of Mr. Gaunt was considerable. He got the sack onto the chair again, then knelt down and hoisted it on to his back. Summoning up all his resources, he staggered out with it into the garden, took a short cut across the grass, and dumped it

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into the cavity he had prepared.

He had just got it settled to his satisfaction when a rectangle of light suddenly appeared in the patch of garden next door. A curtain had been pulled. The French doors opened and a female form appeared on the balcony. He stood there shaking like a leaf, his back toward her. The sweat was running down his face, and his heart was laboring.

"Well, I declare," said Mrs. Gudgeon in her cooing voice, "I took you for a burglar. Heavens above, I always thought your predecessor was nuts on gardening but I never knew even him turn up the same ground twice!"

Mr. Mowbray swung round to face her, and he was snarling like an animal.

"Never mention Gaunt's name to me again, woman!"

"Whoever said a word about Mr. Gaunt?" demanded Mrs. Gudgeon, her pigeon-tones ruffled beyond redemption. "He was only here for a year. Just a bird of passage. I've been talking about the original owner, Mr. Humperdinck."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **THOMAS WALSH**

TITLE: ***Three O'Clock Alarm***

TYPE: Suspense Story

LOCALE: New York City

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A cop on the beat, a nurse with a dying patient, a deserted street past midnight, and as cool and dangerous and menacing a villain as ever played for high stakes . . .*

IT WAS HOT THAT AUGUST NIGHT breathless and still in the narrow side street in the Seventies; even at ten after one in the morning there was no slightest stir of air.

Patrolman O'Mara sat on the area railing of Number Twenty-seven East, his feet crooked through the iron uprights below him, his cap hung carelessly on a spike at his side; while in the shallow areaway three steps down from the pavement a small girl who looked very brisk and professional in her nurse's uniform and her starched white cap glanced up with something of a sigh to a sky darkly sullen with the weight of rain that would not fall.

She murmured, "If it would only rain, O'Mara, that would help."

"I guess it would," O'Mara said, looking down at her with his sober blue eyes, and then moving those eyes along the street—east to Madison, west to Fifth. He saw a quiet thoroughfare of narrow stone houses and grilled iron doors, a street that in summer lay hushed, deserted, and dead. The people of the Seventies were on vacation now. And behind them, secluded and still, quiet and formal, unpushingly elegant, their homes endured the summer, and waited patiently for fall.

It would look, O'Mara thought, like a street of those dead cities you read about in books—the doors and lower windows boarded up, the shades drawn abovestairs, no limousines parked at the curb, no lights

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shining in the marble entries. Around them, in the block from Madison to Fifth, there were lights only in the windows of Number Twenty-seven behind them. Silence, blank-faced houses, the high lonely glow of the street lamps spread away from corner to corner beyond it.

Sally Cross, R.N., seemed impressed by that too. She cupped her hands wearily on the railing and rested her chin on them.

"Thinking, O'Mara? A penny for —Oh. Before I forget. What's the time?" When he had given it to her she took a tiny alarm clock out of her pocket—a gilt-and-ivory affair on a small pedestal. "There!" She wound it vigorously. "Doesn't everything have to happen in weather like this? I dropped my wrist watch this afternoon. Smashed it to bits. And then, of course, when I brought this along, I had to forget to wind it."

"Nights you like to know the time," O'Mara said. "Seems like you have to, somehow."

She smiled at him. "Don't you though? We understand that, O'Mara; daytime people wouldn't. But I've company inside tonight—Mr. Joralemon's still up there. He's poor Mrs. Spencer's nephew. He's waiting for a lawyer from Pittsfield who was supposed to be here hours ago."

"Pittsfield?" O'Mara said. "The old home town, huh? Someone you know, maybe."

The dark eyes moved up to him, demurely bright.

"Well—I knew him once. In high school. Johnny Wetherell. I thought he was the nicest boy then."

O'Mara, his lips set slightly, had a glimpse of him there—a college guy, easy and confident, good-looking too, who'd sat with her on porches in Pittsfield, who'd danced with her and swam with her and kissed her maybe on nights like this. He murmured something offhand and casual, about how nice it was seeing old friends again. And then because something moved in him, so hard and quick it frightened him, he got down from the railing and said he'd better be getting on; time now to ring in to the precinct again.

It was only ten nights since he'd seen her first, so O'Mara knew the something couldn't be love—ten nights since he'd stopped and said hello, while she smiled up at him from the areaway of Number Twenty-seven. The next night, and every night after that, he'd stopped and talked when he saw her—but nothing important, nothing close.

"Well," he said, and grinned a little stiffly at her, "I'll be pushing on. But I'll be around at three again. Think you'll be out?"

"I might," Sally Cross said.

O'Mara waved the club and went off. She didn't know that he was thinking how pretty she looked; all that was in her mind was a rather petulant idea that she was too

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small, really, to scare a man as big as O'Mara . . .

Johnny Wetherell arrived at half-past one. She was in the lower hall then, coming up from the kitchen after drinking a glass of milk, and she answered his ring. With a brief case under his arm, stouter, a bit more impressive than he had been in high school, he ducked his head at her briefly and asked if Mr. Joralemon was still expecting him. Then, in the hall, he looked at her more closely.

"Here," he said, rather uncertainly. "Aren't you—" He grabbed her hand, grinning widely. "Sally Cross! I thought I—What in the world are you doing here?"

It wasn't a long story. Sally Cross gave it to him in the few moments that they paused in the hall. Mrs. Spencer had had the stroke at her summer home in the Berkshires, and they had sent Sally Cross out from the hospital to take care of her; and then, when Mrs. Spencer had been moved down to the city, she had come on down with her because Miss Larsen didn't want to leave Pittsfield, and the old lady needed attention on the train.

"But I never saw you there," Johnny Wetherell said. "At Mrs. Spancer's. I was out there twice."

"No. I had night duty."

"Well," Johnny Wetherell said, enormously pleased, "no wonder Mrs. Spencer's so much better. You'd pull anyone out of anything."

She said gravely, "I'm sorry that's not true. She's terribly ill, Johnny. The day we brought her here she had a second stroke. She's still unconscious."

Johnny Wetherell frowned at her; there was something here he didn't understand, he said. On the phone today Mr. Joralemon had said—

A door opened on the floor above. A slim man in light silk pajamas and a blue robe came down the stairs slowly.

"I'm Arthur Joralemon," he said. "Mrs. Spencer's nephew. I'd given up hope of seeing you tonight."

Johnny Wetherell said something about motor trouble. His old car—

Arthur Joralemon murmured, "Yes," as if that didn't interest him at all. "You've met Miss Cross, I take it?"

"Old friends," Johnny Wetherell said, glancing at her with a smile. "She's the girl I took to all the high school dances. I keep her picture around the house now to make my wife properly jealous of me."

"Indeed," Arthur Joralemon said, with his detached air of weary absorption. He opened the living-room door and went in with Johnny Wetherell.

Sally Cross started back along the hall to the small private elevator nestled under the stairs. And there, in the dimness beneath the overhanging balcony, something shifted quickly out of her way—a vague face, a vague body, she had no

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chance to avoid. She stopped with a little cry.

Lights snapped on above her with a click; Macready, the English chauffeur, took his hand away from the switch.

He rubbed a handkerchief across his red jowls, bedewed now with gleaming specks of perspiration, looking, as Sally Cross thought he always looked, a furtive man for all his squat bulk, with something mean and sly in his pale eyes.

"You might keep out of holes and corners," she said, in the cool voice she always used with him.

"Might I now?" Macready said. He drew the pouting lips in slightly and looked sideways at her, the lids of his eyes well down. Then he went on along the hall to the kitchen stairway, moving quickly and silently.

What had he been doing there, Sally Cross wondered. Listening? The idea seemed fantastic; it didn't stay long with her. She went up in the slow, old-fashioned elevator to the third floor, and crossed the hall to the big, dim chamber whose two windows were open listlessly now to the street. In the four-poster bed against the back wall Mrs. Spencer lay half turned from her—a small, frail body, no larger than a child.

She was still unconscious; her respiration was harsh and labored. Sally Cross smoothed the bedclothes gently, and moistened the parched lips. At seventy-eight, after two strokes, there was not much to be done for her. Sally Cross, troubled by the deep pity of youth, moved across to the window and looked down into the street.

Suddenly, absurdly, she wanted to see O'Mara's comforting bigness swinging along the pavement below. At three he'd be back. She looked mechanically at her wrist before remembering her watch was gone—before recalling, too, that she had left her clock downstairs in the kitchen when she had gone there for her milk.

This time she did not use the elevator; she could be down to the kitchen, and most of the way up again before that slow old thing creaked halfway to the basement. On the carpeted stairs her light steps were almost soundless; from the first landing she could hear Johnny Wetherell and Mr. Joralemon talking in the hall below.

"—what you imagine this to be," Arthur Joralemon was saying, in that tone of his that was, as ever, wearily and carelessly amused. "Bribery, perhaps. Have you that impression, Mr. Wetherell?"

"I'm not quite sure," Johnny Wetherell said quietly. "But I drove down here tonight only because I thought Mrs. Spencer wished to see me—because that's what you told me today on the phone."

"Yes," Mr. Joralemon said, while Sally Cross paused uncertainly above them. "It happened to be true. My aunt and I discussed all morning—"

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"I don't think so," Johnny Wetherell said. "You see, Miss Cross told me fifteen minutes ago your aunt has been unconscious all this week."

She could see Mr. Joralemon then; he was standing by the living-room door.

"Ah," he said. "Miss Cross. Naturally. You—" He paused. "You're rather suspicious of me. I presume you're thinking of the fact that I am no longer the favorite nephew—not in the will you drew up for my aunt some weeks ago at her summer home. But, my dear fellow, she regrets that will exceedingly now. She told me this morning—"

"She was unconscious this morning."

Mr. Joralemon smiled at the ceiling.

"You will insist on that," he said very mildly. "If it is true, how have I found out about the new will at all?"

There was anger in Johnny Wetherell's voice when he answered. "She had the copy I gave her. That might have—"

"Been abstracted, I suppose." Mr. Joralemon smiled gently. "That is the method by which I found out about my—my altered status. Not sole beneficiary now—not much of a beneficiary at all, in fact. So—may I proceed?—you're quite sure that I want this new will to destroy it, in order that the previous one, the one that favors me, the one in the custody of her family lawyers here in New York, will be accepted."

"All I know," Johnny Wetherell said, the flatness still in his voice, "is that ten thousand dollars is a lot of money to offer me for coming here tonight. A lot more than I'm worth. As for the will, Mr. Joralemon—it stays with me, in my care, until my client is in a condition to discuss it. Good night, sir."

"I'm sorry," Mr. Joralemon said. "I wouldn't want you to think—"

He moved after Johnny Wetherell toward the street door, past the living room, past the stairs, past a table set flat against the wall. Only when he was a step beyond that did Sally Cross see what his clasped hands had swept up from beside it—a bronze, elaborately carved smoking stand, three feet high, as hard and solid as a bar of steel.

His arms raised and fell while she stared down dumbly; bronze carving glittered briefly in the light. Drunkenly, without a sound, Johnny Wetherell plunged forward across the rug.

"Macready!" called the nephew.

One foot a step lower than the other, one hand still on the banister, she stood motionless on the stairs, frozen by that fantastic shadow play. Macready scuttled out of the shadows below her.

"Get him downstairs," Mr. Joralemon said, his voice harshly, savagely breathless. "Put him in that storeroom off the kitchen. Lock him up there."

Macready's red face was glazed with terror; words bubbled a mo-

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ment, stupidly, in his throat. "Never shoulda done this. No. Now—"

"Do you think I planned it, you fool? Do you think—" Mr. Joralemon stopped, breathing heavily; he put one hand up and rubbed his mouth. "But I couldn't let him go out with it. Roberts thinks she won't last the night." He added very low, "It's done now, Macready. I'll stick by it."

Macready croaked, "The nurse, Mr. Arthur—if she heard—"

"The nurse," Joralemon repeated, vaguely again, his head jerking up.

She reacted then to the panic that commanded her, swifter than thought. Around the landing, up the stairs beyond, into Mrs. Spencer's room, across it to her chair by the window. He was no more than ten seconds behind her, moving quietly too, standing quietly in the doorway of the room, looking in at her across the shaded lamp, his face dim against the shadows of the hall, half-seen, unreadable.

She got up, smiling at him. She said in a steady voice, "There's no change, Mr. Joralemon. But I believe she's a little quieter tonight."

"That's fine," he said. "If she can only rest well—"

He nodded at her from the hall; an instant later he was gone . . .

It was two o'clock then. O'Mara, working south, looked up at the dimly lit third-story windows of Number Twenty-seven, twirled his club, yawned, wished fretfully it would get cooler, and moved on. Tramp, tramp, tramp, O'Mara thought, all the night, hour after hour; nothing coming up, nothing breaking, from one month's end to another. No way at all for a good cop to get on.

He went moodily on . . .

There was only one thought in her mind when Joralemon left—that he was out in the hall now, waiting in the darkness there, listening, watching, for what she might do. If she cried out now, if she tried to make someone hear her, he'd be in to stop her—he or Macready; and in the apartment house on the corner a man might stir restlessly in his sleep, grateful when her outcry ceased, briefly fretful at the drunken party. After that nothing, no one—the street lamps below, the empty pavements, the blind windows, the shuttered entries.

But at three, O'Mara had said—at three he'd be seeing her downstairs. So, at three, if she could slip out to him, or call to him here from the window—It would be two now, she thought; perhaps a little after. Her alarm clock was still in the kitchen. In an hour then.

As soon as she considered it, the thought of that hour became intolerable. At three, what would they have done to Johnny Wetherell? The blow, the fall, the harsh, quick words, repeated themselves vividly, in flashes like lightning, across her brain. "Done now, Macready. I'll stick by it."

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His voice rang again in her ears, a low voice, slightly breathless, menacing, calm. He had the new will now, the will he had got Johnny Wetherell to bring down with him, the will he wanted to destroy. Who knew of it? Johnny Wetherell; two witnesses; Mrs. Spencer. And if tonight the old lady died, if the two witnesses were silenced or bought—who could stop him then but Johnny,

She saw one thing: that he wouldn't harm Johnny, that he daren't while his aunt lived. But if she didn't, if tonight, as Dr. Roberts had thought, the labored effort of her breathing stopped—

It seemed to Sally Cross, while she stood above the bed, that already the sound of that had changed. Slower now, quieter. The pulse slow too, weak and thready, as if life were only a weary effort.

She understood then that she couldn't wait for O'Mara, that to sit there helplessly was the one thing of all she could not endure. The phone in the hall downstairs was connected. Could she reach that?

Slipping out to the hall, silently down the stairs, she found the lower corridor empty, the door at one side half open to the darkness of the living room. For a moment, halting at the foot of the steps, she glanced at the street door before her, not ten feet away.

Was Joralemon gone, downstairs perhaps with Macready and Johnny Wetherell? She could open that door now, without a sound; she could be gone before they could stop her. Ten feet—

"Miss Cross," Joralemon said, even as she moved stiffly toward it. He took shape then in the living-room doorway, in the blue robe, his eyes fixed on her dully under the heavy smudge of his brows. "Were you going out?"

Stopped, turned to him, she murmured something about the heat.

"A long, cold drink," Mr. Joralemon said in his tired voice. "Macready will take care of you. In the kitchen."

She did not hesitate; she knew she couldn't. The lights came on in the basement hall, and Macready's red face looked up at her from the stairwell; she had to go by him calmly, past the closed storeroom door, into the big kitchen.

Behind her, in the passage, there was the sound of the elevator. He'd be going up now, to see his aunt. To see if she still—

She smiled at Macready. "It's hot."

Against the wall, shirt open on his hairy chest, he let his lower lip droop.

"Talkin' helps it," he said. "Talkin' helps it a lot."

He was silent, watching her with a half-fierce, half-frightened oxlike glance as she opened the refrigerator, as she poured out a glass of milk and sat down by the table to drink it. No sound at all then but

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the tiny, metallic clicking of her clock on the shelf at her back. One minute, two minutes, three minutes—

The elevator whirred softly again; Joralemon's steps came to them down the passage. She knew what had happened as soon as she saw his eyes. Suddenly, as Dr. Roberts had thought it would come; painlessly, quickly. A sigh, a faint breath—

It was a certain knowledge that chilled and clarified everything in her mind. She looked about her at the stove, the white sink, the half windows in the walls, open to the street to the areaway where—how long ago?—she had talked to O'Mara.

Not till three now, she knew—not with the old lady gone at last. When O'Mara came—

She saw her clock on the window shelf—twenty-five minutes to three—and she moved slowly toward it.

"I'd almost forgotten to wind it," she said.

Neither of them seemed to hear her. Macready was looking with blinking, frightened eyes at Mr. Arthur Joralemon's bony face.

The clock was again on the window shelf then; she was turned to them. Mr. Arthur seemed to see her for the first time, from behind the gray, soft film that glazed the hollows of his eyes. He made a gesture with one hand toward her.

"Macready," he said, slowly, very clearly. "Don't let her scream."

In the narrow passage, with the kitchen at one end, the lighted cage of the elevator at the other, Mr. Arthur looked at something down the passage—something that Macready couldn't see. The storeroom door was closed then, locked and bolted fast; Macready had managed Miss Sally Cross fast enough.

"What is it?" Macready asked now, the fat, baby's mouth working shakily. "The old lady, Mr. Arthur? Is she—"

Mr. Arthur made a motion with his hand—out and down.

"Ah," Macready said. He moved uneasily against the wall. "And them—they'll raise hell when they get out of there. They'll—"

Mr. Arthur's eyes came back from their vision; they began to glitter dimly under his brows.

"Will they?" he said. "Will they, Macready?"

The squat man peered up into his face.

"Here," he said, his voice breaking on the word. "Nothin' like that, Mr. Arthur. I wouldn't—"

"It was going to be simple and easy," Mr. Arthur said, "when you told me about the will. Wasn't it, Macready? Because you and the gardener up there were the only witnesses. And you'd both keep quiet—all I had to do was to take care of you. The lawyer, too—didn't you tell me it would be simple to fix that shyster from Pittsfield? But I couldn't fix him with money. I tried. So there was only one way

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left. And the girl suspected something; she was trying to slip out when I caught her in the hall. And now—there's only that one way left for them both. The way you're thinking of, Macready."

He paused, drawing a deep breath, then went on calmly and slowly.

"It can be perfect; it all works out, Macready. You heard them quarreling tonight—the girl and this lawyer, remember? You heard them go on like that for hours, in this house, while I was sleeping."

"What?" Macready said. He looked bewildered. "What are you saying—"

"You'd seen her earlier, around the desk where I keep my gun. You were wakened late at night when he screamed something—'Don't, don't, Sally!' You heard the shots, three or four, before you could get out of bed. And you found them dead, the both of them, in the hall outside my aunt's room when you ran down."

"Ah!" Macready said. He rubbed a hand across his mouth, blinking the small eyes again. "But why, Mr. Arthur? Who'd believe—

Mr. Arthur went on in his savagely breathless voice, "Let me talk, you fool. They were high school sweethearts—he told me tonight they were crazy about each other once. Small towns remember those things, Macready; they build up on them. When this happens—crazy about him, someone will remember; always was. People are going to believe what we tell them, Macready, because it's going to be something dirty and secret and shameful. They'll invent meetings that never happened; they'll magnify them and connect them. And in the end, Macready, in three days, the whisperers will have everyone in their town believing it."

Watching Macready, his sunken mouth curled a little. He said, "You'd believe it; you'd never question it. And you called him up in Pittsfield this afternoon. She got you to do that. So if he told anyone there that he was coming down on business, to see Mrs. Spencer—that's a lie, too. The lie he told his wife to get away and see her here. Do you see it now, Macready?"

The squat man's eyes were red-rimmed and panicky, his words thick.

"Who'll—who'll—"

"Would you?" Mr. Arthur asked, quietly contemptuous. "Get outside now. See if that cop she talks to is anywhere around. Slam the door when you come in—then go up the stairs to your room. I'll get them in the elevator when I hear you; I'll say I just found the old lady. They'll come up with me, Macready. They'll think—"

When he stopped, when he turned and went over to the stairs, Macready's lips worked for a moment, but no sound came out. He knew what Mr. Arthur was going for; he knew where he'd find it, in

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the right-hand drawer of his desk upstairs. Three days ago, with nothing to do, Macready had cleaned and oiled and loaded it for him. He'd never thought then—

It was six minutes to three then; outside O'Mara had just stopped by the area railing. He looked up as the front door opened, a little disappointed when Macready came out, a little surprised when Macready stopped violently short the moment he saw him.

"Okay," O'Mara grunted. "Only me. Take it easy, Liverpool."

"Yes," Macready said, in a queer, furry tone. "I thought for a minute —you give me a turn, you did." He closed the door quietly behind him and came out to the railing, and when O'Mara asked him where the nurse was he did not seem to hear the question. Then:

"Her," he said, just as O'Mara started to repeat it, moving his head quickly around, and clasping his hands together on a square bar of the railing, "upstairs she is—her and the gentleman friend. All the blessed night." His sentences came out in jerks, deep pauses between. "Is he goin' to do like he promised? she's askin' him. Is he goin' to divorce his missus and marry her? Or is it tryin' to make her desperate he was? Tryin' to make her do away with herself for good? Two hours now, in the hall below me room—would a deaf man sleep through that?"

"Through what?" O'Mara asked, quietly enough. But something cold and flat, completely solid, smoothed out the lines of his face. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"What?" Macready repeated loudly after him. He made a vehement gesture with his arm—a sudden, upward fling. "Them two—who else? He married, d'ye see, and her with the look of butter not meltin' in her mouth—but layin' it onto him now, up there cryin' and sobbin' and threatenin' him harm. And the poor sick lady—dead, maybe, that one not carin' at all. If I thought she had a gun on her—"

His eyes darted up to O'Mara's face, glittering between their pouched folds of flesh. But O'Mara, looking upward to the windows on the third floor, did not notice them at all.

Softly, breathing better, Macready whispered quickly, "She had me phone him this afternoon, d'ye see. Like the poor sick lady had called for him. A married fella, O'Mara—but she's had her bit of fun with him all the same. Miss high and mighty—a nice bit of goods. Ah!" He managed a wooden grin. "A queer world, O'Mara, with the things that happen in it. Them that dance—"

O'Mara felt funny—numb all over. The boy friend from Pittsfield, he thought. Sure. She'd told him.

He moved away from the railing three or four steps, not knowing he

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had moved at all. And Macready saw the sick boy's face on him; Macready knew it was as good as over then. He felt proud of himself; Mr. Arthur would be pleased. Everything set now—

He jumped at the noise behind him; he jumped and spun around, erratic and fast, like a man yanked by a string. But the soft, shrill ringing, lengthening time in the silent street—

Macready moved his eyes right and left, heavy body crouched.

Then he had it placed; then, when he understood it, he could have shouted with relief. He saw a round shape upright on the kitchen window shelf; he scuttled over and picked it up and pressed in the button and straightened. Damn it! he thought smiling at O'Mara, the sweat ice-chilled on his body. Always going off like that, Macready mumbled, any time at all. He wished he'd never bought it.

The silence rang now in his ears. His words came from a long way off. O'Mara, his face not changed at all, stepped down to the area; O'Mara took it out of his hand.

"It's yours," O'Mara said. "It's yours, is it, Macready?"

"Yes," Macready said. He nodded heavily twice. "Bought it second-hand—to save a dollar. And ever since—"

Gilt and ivory, O'Mara saw—the one she had set by his watch tonight. He brought it up closer to his face, and made out what time it had been set for. Three. When he had promised to be around.

"It worked all right," he said. "It worked all right now, Macready."

But the squat man couldn't make it out very well; sweat blurred in his lashes. He stammered something. Maybe he'd—O'Mara's eyes looked narrow and blue and cold; all the light in the shallow area seemed gathered about them now. And Macready couldn't look at them, he had to get away; panting, striking out blindly with his hands, he came out against OMara's chest in a sudden, savage plunge.

It was that plunge, and the crazy terror shinning on his face, that made O'Mara see instantly, without reason, without any logical thought, that he'd almost betrayed her. He made some sort of sound roused deep in him by that knowledge and staggered Macready by a blow with his nightstick that didn't travel ten inches. Damn you, damn you, Macready, if you've hurt her—

He got the squat man in through the unlocked front door. When it slammed behind them Macready looked at it stupidly, as if there was something there he should remember. O'Mara held him by the throat, against the wall.

"Where is she?" he said thickly. "I'll kill you, Macready. I'll kill you with my bare hands. Here. Now. Where—"

Behind them, a floor below them, there was the muffled low whine of machinery. Twice then, against

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O'Mara's hand, Macready tried to push out from the wall.

"Stop him," he said loudly, the second time O'Mara threw him back—as if he didn't see O'Mara. "You got to get up there ahead of him. He's got his gun. He's got the two of them. He's—"

There was no transition in O'Mara's mind—no memory of how he left Macready and reached the stairs. He was on them, running up them—he remembered that—falling upward and clawing with his hands and feet. He was on the landing; beside him that muffled vibration, persistent and placeless, moved steadily up.

And then he was at the next flight, taking the steps three at a time, plunging up through a thick darkness that pushed down solidly against him. There was no breath; there was no time to suck in air.

The vibration stopped as O'Mara reached the next landing, as he saw a sliver of light glint and widen on the wall at his left. As he saw a man come out of the elevator, with Sally Cross behind him, and a slim man in a blue bathrobe last of all.

The slim man let them get a step ahead; his bony face bent a little forward, the corners of his pale mouth twitched up. And then O'Mara came out from the darkness of the landing, stumbling, but stumbling fast, his arms hooked wide, all his leverage in his chest and shoulders. He was past her, past the man from Pittsfield, he was against the lean man's thighs bearing him to the floor.

Six feet beyond them, on the waxed boards, a pistol spun about in a wheel of reflected light—spun and slowed and stopped, while the lean man tried to reach it, thresh-ing madly under O'Mara's weight. He stopped soon; O'Mara wasn't gentle. And, incredibly, all the way up, he'd held on to his club.

Later on O'Mara got a word with her alone. She knew he'd be there, she told him; she'd been sure of that because he said he would. And in the kitchen, when Mr. Joralemon came down that last time, she'd had a crazy idea, the only thing she could think of—to set the alarm, so that if they stopped her some way he'd hear it and see it, and know something was wrong if she didn't come out.

O'Mara didn't tell her how he'd almost missed it. There was only one man going to count with her now—Daniel Charles O'Mara.

When he kissed her in the area-way of Number Twenty-seven, after the doctor had come, and some plain-clothes men, to give Joralemon and Macready the business, she must have known it too.

Because her breath caught a little, and her eyes shone, and she said, "Why, O'Mara," in the softest voice he'd ever heard. It was clear though; there was in it, even that first time, everything O'Mara wanted to know.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**MICHAEL ZUROY**
TITLE:	***Visit to the Big City***
TYPE:	Crime Story
LOCALE:	New York
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*If you think you've read zany, offbeat, wacky, wild-and-woolly yarns before, try this one for size. Fair warning—keep your tongue in your cheek!*

WHEN LANNUS WALKED INTO the big bedroom he found Rut sprawled on the round bed with his shoes on, smoking a cigar. Two crushed cigar butts, one of them still smoldering, cuddled on the bleached-wood night table. An open box of cigars sat on the floor, near Rut's drooping hand.

"Mornin', old son," Rut greeted. "Have a seegar. Found three boxes in the closet."

"Look a-here," Lannus said. "I found a room with scalps in it."

Rut sat up. "Whut's that you say?"

"I found scalps. Hangin' on a wall."

"You funnin'? Maybe you found wigs. Noo Yawk apartments ain't got scalps."

"I don't think them is wigs. They is different colors an' sizes an' they look real hooman. Some is black, some is brown, some is gray, some is yalla, an' some is female."

"They is *gotta* be wigs. Lemme look." Rut jumped out of bed.

In the little room Rut stared at the hairpieces neatly arranged along one wall. He took one off and examined it. "Them do look like scalps," he admitted, "but them can't be."

Now, how come two Ozark hillbillies like the Baxter cousins, Langhurst and Rutledge, were staying in this fancy New York apartment that wasn't theirs, arguing about scalps? How come they weren't sprawling around the group of shacks on the mountain side where they normally lived?

It started when, after a long

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period of brooding, Rutledge Baxter voiced certain sentiments. Eyeing his surroundings critically, Rut announced, "I be mighty tired of this poor livin'. I be mighty weary of cockeyed, broke-down shacks, an' rocklike beds an' pigs walkin' in an' out, an' chicken droppin's in the kitchen. There ain't no refinement here."

"Do tell," said Langhurst Baxter sleepily from under the house. Lannus liked to take his ease under the house, lying prone on the dank earth, looking out between the posts at whatever crossed the background of cans, bottles, trees, and brush. Lannus liked something close overhead sheltering him. A house bottom was best, but a bed, car, wagon, or man-sized dry culvert made good cover too.

Rut shifted his wiry figure to a lower level of the rotting steps, scratched in his shock of black hair vigorously with the nails of both hands, and leaned back on his elbows. His sharp eyes were bright with an idea. He said, "Lannus, you an' me are headin' for Noo Yawk."

"Do tell."

"Yes ma'am! We goin' to see the big city. We goin' to have us a taste of livin' like gentlefolk."

"How you mean, Rut?"

"We goin' to occupy us an apartment—one of these heah luxury apartments, like in the movies."

There was a scuffling sound from under the house and Lannus' huge, lanky body emerged in sections. He regarded Rut with drooping jaw. "How we goin' do that, Rut? Don't that take a powerful heap o' money?"

"Nope! I got her figgered. Won't cost us a cent, beyond for some eats. We'll hitchhike there. Once we're in Noo Yawk leave her to me."

There was a silence. Finally Lannus said doubtfully, "I dunno. Kind of a scary ideah, ain't it?"

"No use talking, Lannus. I made up our minds. We goin' to Noo Yawk. On'y one thing I'm cautioning you 'bout."

"Whut's that?"

"Keep your hands off folks. I don't want you hurtin' nobody, hear? Anything goes wrong, let me handle it. You know how strong you are, Lannus. Keep your hands off folk or we might end up in bad trouble. Promise me that."

Lannus' wide mouth stretched around his snagged teeth in a sheepish grin. "Okay, I promise."

Two weeks later the Baxter cousins were in New York, each carrying a few possessions in a small bag. In Rut's bag there was also a length of light but strong rope.

Walking around New York, Lannus thought: this is sure a scary place, with its terrible noise an' scootin' vehicles an' billions of people an' monstrous tall buildin's an' spooky subways an' high an' mighty flunkeys an' dressed-up

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women he wouldn't dare look in the eye. Sleepin' wasn't too bad though. While they were workin' on gettin' the apartment they slept in this big park in the middle of town. Bein' summer, it wasn't no hardship at all. Plenty of washrooms in the big public buildings, with real hot an' cold running water.

Lannus had to admit that old Rut's idea was mighty slick. It bein' summer, an' a whole mess of rich Noo Yawkuhs bein' away for the summer, they was bound to be plenty of empty apartments. Just keep watchin' windows, Rut said. Windows dark every night, with blinds or shades that don't ever change position—those are the signs. Pick a fancy house. A lot of them you could just walk into, Rut said, people walking in and out all the time. Hide out on the roof till folks were asleep, an' if there wasn't no fire escape, use the rope to slide down to the window, bust in a pane, unhook her, an' the place was theirs.

Of course, Lannus had wondered about the danger of neighbors catching on, but Rut said in a pitying voice, "You be ignorant 'bout Noo Yawkuhs. Ain't you hear they pay no mind to each other?"

But it didn't work out as easy as Rut had thought it would. First place they tried, a dignified ten-story building in the fifties, the doorman barred their way.

"We visitin'," Rut informed him haughtily.

The doorman, a portly fellow almost as big as Lannus, held his ground like a rock, demanding to know whom they were visiting. Rut told him to jump out of the way right quick. The man advanced on them threateningly, raising his voice, and ordered them out.

At this, Lannus' huge hand flicked across the doorman's face and the man went staggering clear across the lobby to fetch up against a mirror which shattered. Rut looked at the figure lying quietly amid the broken glass, grabbed Lannus, and yelled. "We has got to git!"

They dashed out and lost themselves in the crowd. Back in Central Park, Rut gave Lannus a smart crack on the skull. Lannus howled, "What you do that for, Rut?"

"You know what for. I tol' you, keep yo' hands off folk."

"He was sassy. He was preventin' us."

"No matter what, don't wallop folk, else I goin' to get mad."

"All right, Rut," said Lannus, subdued. "But I be discouraged. Thought you said we could walk into those places?"

"Mostly we can. Just ran into a nosey cuss this time. Leave her to me, Lannus. We goin' to do all right."

As Rut had said, they got into the next building all right, and

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made it to the roof. At two in the morning they tied the rope to a vent pipe and lowered it to the dark window Rut had chosen. Rut slid down, and dangling nine stories above the street, began carefully breaking the pane with a little hammer.

A bloodcurdling scream almost made him lose his grip on the rope. Staring through the window he met the terrified, unbelieving eyes of a scantily clad woman. She took another look at the man dangling from a rope in front of her ninth-floor window, screamed again, and collapsed in a faint.

Faster than a jack rabbit could run, Rut shinnied back up. "Come on!" he squawked. "We has got to git!" He looked for another way out besides the stairway; they didn't want to be trapped on the way down. There was an adjacent building, but a dangereous-looking gap showed between the parapets of the two roofs. Rut made up his mind while he untied the rope. "We got to jump."

The two cousins sailed across a drop that would have unsettled them completely had they looked down, then sprinted to the street and got away.

Breathing hard, Lannus told Rut, "Now I be plumb discouraged. This here be too many for me. Thought you said that place was empty?"

"Sure 'peared empty," Rut said sheepishly. "However, that mischance can't happen twice in a row. We'll do her next time, for certain positive."

Lannus groaned. "Do there have to be a next time?"

"There do," said Rut determinedly. "We goin' live in one of them luxury apartments come hell or high water."

Well, of course, they finally made it, and that's how it came about that the Baxter cousins were staying in this fancy New York apartment, the one with the hairpieces in a little room. They hadn't looked around much the night they got in, just enough to see what a grand place it was. Tuckered, they had gone right to sleep, Rut in the big bedroom with the great round bed under a canopy, Lannus under the piano in the living room, with its fringed shawl hanging down to the rug.

Lannus, poking around the following morning, had come on the hairpieces. Now, looking down at the thing in Rut's hand, he said, "Why you insisting these can't be scalps when they sure 'pear to be?"

"Well, criminy, Lannus, folks don't go takin' scalps these days. Hit's agin' the law."

"How you know these folk be law-abidin'?"

That stopped Rut for a moment. Then he said, "Well, even if they ain't, what they want scalps for? Answer me that."

"I dunno. Mebbe for trophies. Like some folk mount deer head.

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This sure look like a trophy collection."

"Now Lannus, don't you realize if that was so, the folk that provided the scalps would have to be most likely dead?"

"I realizes her," said Lannus. "An' that's what botherin' me."

The cousins stared at each other in silence. Rut said, "Now look a-here, Lannus, I'm tellin' you them can't be scalps. They is maybe a collection of some kind of wig. Or some kind of decoration. They is all kind of crazy decoration these days. But scalps, they ain't."

"How we know what kind o' folk live here?" said Lannus, stubbornly sticking to his point.

"Well," said Rut, "we sure goin' try find out right now."

Followed by Lannus, he prowled through the apartment, going through desks and drawers, pulling out papers and documents, scattering those he didn't understand on the floor. Laboriously, he perused the others and grunted in satisfaction when he finished. "Jus' ordinary rich, respect'ble Noo Yawkuhs," he announced. "Man's name is Darwin H. Frobisher, wife name of Josephine. No young 'uns that I can make out. Man manufactures pencils, got a big plant. Belongs to a flock of respect'ble societies an' clubs. Wife active in cult'ral an' charity work. Here's some pitchers—writin' on backs shows it's them. Now they don't look like no scalp hunters."

Lannus regarded the pictures, seeing a plump, eyeglassed, mild-looking man of middle-age and a dignified-looking woman, slightly taller than her husband. "They looks all right," Lannus admitted grudgingly, "but looks ain't all. How we know they is normal folk like us? Some folk hide a mess o' secrets in private, an' maybe we bunked into one. Remember ol' Susubelle Blawford, back home? Never was a sweeter-seemin', finer-'pearin' woman, an' one night she up an' took an axe an' chopped up her fambly of eight slicker than po'k chops."

"Now I had just enough of that scary talk, Lannus!" exploded Rut. "There ain't nothin' wrong with these folk, an' it don't concern us anyhow. We not goin' to be meetin' them—we here to enjoy some fancy livin' an' we goin' to do it."

"I got a feelin' maybe we oughta go home, Rut."

"We stayin'."

"Well, all right, Rut, you allus know best. Sure is a grand place, I do admit. How long we goin' stay?"

Rut spat on the rug thoughtfully. "Two, three weeks I reckon. Most rich Noo Yawkuhs stay away all summer, but we'll play her safe. Now, let's look over the place an' see what vittles they left in the pantry."

Lannus could hardly believe that people owned so handsome a place as this apartment just to squat in.

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He'd never seen anything like it, outside of the movies. The main room looked about as big as a dance hall, and the whole durn floor was covered from one wall clear across to the other with a carpet as soft and deep as a feather bed. There was a sofa that went around corners and looked about twenty feet long. There were easy chairs seemed fit for a king or an ambassador. There were tables, high and low, that shone like a pond on a still afternoon when the slanting sun slides off the water. There was china, crystal, ornaments, doodads, and hand-painted pictures.

There was this grand piano, looked about as big as a circus wagon, covered with this fringed shawl, and there was a bar full of hard liquor.

There were three bathrooms in the apartment, two of them adjoining bedrooms. Lannus had seen washrooms in public buildings, but never bathrooms as pretty as these, in colors of pink, robin's-egg blue, and tadpole green.

There were four bedrooms, so fine Lannus was afraid to sleep in any of them at first. There was a dining room, a library next to the little room with the hairpieces, a kitchen, and a pantry.

The pantry was well stocked. There was enough canned and packaged food to last for weeks. They breakfasted on waffles, maple syrup, jam, honey, Vienna sausages, corn, and coffee. Rut threw the dirty dishes and silverware into a corner of the kitchen. "No sense loadin' up the sink," he said. "We don't need to wash anything. Plenty more dinnerware around."

They found cases of beer, so they started up the refrigerator and filled it with beer bottles. Rut figured out how to get the air conditioning going. Came time for another snack, Rut opened a dozen cans of caviar, saying, "Rich folk feed on this all the time."

They took the caviar into the living room, broke the necks off some bottles of champagne from the bar, turned the television set on, and sprawled on the sofa. They dropped the empty tins, glasses, and broken bottles on the rug. "I do believe," sighed Lannus contentedly, "I am goin' to enjoy this here luxury livin'."

Then the two cousins from Arkansas snored off into slumber . . .

The days drifted by blissfully. Rut and Lannus slept all over the apartment, Rut finally settling down to the big round bed with the canopy. They pulled clean sheets out of the linen closet every night, throwing the used ones on the floor. Lannus tried sleeping on the beds, under the beds, and in the bathtubs, but he ended up in his original spot under the piano.

That piano sure made elegant cover—more elegant than anything Lannus had yet holed up under. The rug made a man's bones feel good, and that big shawl drooped

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all the way down to the rug, closing a man in and making him feel safe. Lannus spent a lot of time just relaxing under that piano, dreamily listening to the hi-fi set. Rut liked television better, so they kept them both going at once. Sometimes Lannus whittled on the piano legs while he listened. He'd always been a pretty good whittler.

Rut did a little art work himself. He found some oil paints in the library, and figuring some of the paintings on the walls could stand improving, he went to work on them. Somehow they didn't seem to improve much, so he decided to do something original on the living room walls; but after several busy days he lost interest.

Once Lannus said, "Rut, I be getting nervous. Suppose these scalp hunters come home an' cotch us?"

Irritably, Rut said, "That'll be enough of that talk, Lannus. I just about proved to you they ain't scalp hunters, just ordinary, rich Noo Yawkuhs. An' we ain't goin' to be cotched. They goin' to stay away all summer."

"Well, just suppose."

"Wouldn't be too bad, long as you keep your promise an' keep your hands off folk. Worst that could happen, we might get put in the jug a little while, for trespassin' an' such like, if'n we should be cotched. It's hurtin' folk brings bad trouble. Now just shut up about it, an' keep shut."

They went on a two-day drunk, only sobering up because they felt sick. It was lovely while it lasted, with the bar holding all the liquor they wanted. After a while, of course, they had to push the broken, empty bottles to one side of the room so that they could walk around, but that didn't take too long.

They roughhoused a little, jumping up and down on beds and chairs, but they discovered that this fancy furniture wasn't too strong.

They took bubble baths in all the bathrooms. They found bottles of lotions and nice smelling stuff, and they tried them all, sometimes mixing them. Lannus liked to pour the stuff over his head and smear it under his arms. This, Lannus thought, was, like Rut said, real luxury livin'.

Of course, the refuse began to pile up a little, but when it got too high they threw the overflow into one of the spare bedrooms.

Then one night the key turned in the lock.

They didn't hear it because both the television and hi-fi were going. Lannus was relaxing under the piano. Rut was lying on the sofa, a cigar in his mouth, depositing the ashes on the upholstery.

"Good Lord!" a voice exclaimed in what seemed to be the absolute extremity of shock.

Rut just about jumped high enough to bounce off the ceiling, landing on his feet and turning

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white. There was a moment when Lannus figured he was dead, because his heart wasn't moving, but it started up again. Lannus didn't move though; he peeked out from underneath the shawl. He saw a mild, pudgy man and a skinny, taller woman, both standing with open mouths and narrowing eyes. He recognized them from their pictures. Mr. and Mrs. Frobisher were home.

Mr. Frobisher strode to the television and hi-fi sets and turned them off. Mrs. Frobisher opened her purse, took out a small gun, and pointed it at Rut. Lannus saw Rut's hands shoot up and remain there, trembling.

"What," inquired Mr. Frobisher, "is the meaning of this intrusion, and this—this—vandalism?"

"Hardly the word, dear," choked Mrs. Frobisher, her eyes darting round the room. "The destruction is indescribable. My poor rug! My Hepplewhite! My crystal!"

For an instant Lannus thought she was going to pull the trigger, but she didn't, just stood there squawking.

Lannus heard Rut trying to explain. He was telling the story straight, just as it had happened, except that he was leaving out about Lannus, pretending he was alone. Lannus figured that Rut wanted him to stay put until he saw a chance to get away.

Shucks, Lannus thought, just as soon charge out an' rescue Rut from these puny folk. But he wasn't goin' agin Rut's wishes. Rut had tol' him an' tol' him to keep his hands off folk.

"Josephine, my dear," said Mr. Frobisher in a silky voice, "just you watch this fellow while I check the apartment to make sure he's alone." He too produced a gun.

When he returned, his face bore a stunned look. "A shambles," he said. "An utter shambles." Then a strange glitter came into his eyes. "But he's alone, all right."

The same glitter appeared in Mrs. Frobisher's eyes. "May I?" she inquired.

"Certainly, my dove." He pointed his gun at Rut.

Lannus saw Mrs. Frobisher walk behind Rut, take an object from her purse which clicked and became a knife, and slip it into Rut. Rut's eyes tried to pop out; his hands waved and his feet staggered; he doubled up and fell on his face.

Golly, thought Lannus, she's done for ole Rut!

Mrs. Frobisher bent over Rut, worked with the knife, and lifted something off him.

Golly, thought Lannus, she's gone an' scalped ole Rut! I was right about those bein' scalps. For once Rut was wrong—he shudda paid me mind.

"You always do that so neatly, my dear," complimented Mr. Frobisher.

Mrs. Frobisher blushed slightly.

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"Thank you, Darwin. This was a special pleasure. Oh, my poor rug!"

"Another scalp for our collection," said Mr. Frobisher. "Although we've never been forced to take one in our own apartment. Might prove embarrassing. Let me think now: how should we dispose of the body?"

At this point Lannus realized that there was no longer any reason for keeping his hands off these folk, so he came out from under the piano.

When Mr. Frobisher saw the hulking figure with the dangling hands coming at him he became too petrified to raise his gun. Lannus reached out and casually broke Mr. Frobisher's neck.

Then he threw him at Mrs. Frobisher to spoil her aim, and while she was trying to free herself of the body he went over and just as casually broke her neck.

After that Lannus stood in the center of the room surveying the scene blankly, trying to think what to do next. Actually nothin' to do but go home. But something was bothering him. Somehow things didn't look complete.

Then he realized what it was. He took the knife and scalped Mr. and Mrs. Frobisher. He picked up Rut's scalp, took the three scalps to the little room, and nailed them to the wall, rounding out the Frobisher collection.

Back in the living room he looked about him again and frowned. Still didn't seem just right. 'Twas unsightly, those bodies lyin' every which way. Better neaten up a bit.

Lannus lifted Mr. Frobisher and placed him in a sitting position on the sofa, looking almost natural except for his scalped head. He placed an open book in his lap.

He put Mrs. Frobisher in a chair, resting one hand on an end table, curling the fingers around a glass which he filled with whiskey.

Now, ole Rut. Ole Rut deserved somethin' special. The piano, Lannus thought. That would be about the grandest coffin Rut could have wished for.

Lannus gently tried to stuff Rut into the top of the piano. But he couldn't get all of Rut inside the shining concert grand—Rut's head stuck out. Lannus didn't like the looks of his cousin's scalped head, so he rummaged around the apartment until he found a silk top hat. It was small for Rut, but he managed to jam it down on the head. He inspected the result admiringly. Looked real fancy, Rut did.

Well, now, he might as well leave.

In the doorway Lannus turned for one last look. His wide mouth slowly stretched into a grin. He looked at the scene before him, pictured the rest of the apartment, and began to chuckle.

He'd heard about these smart city detectives.

He'd like to see 'em solve this one!

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**S. J. PERELMAN**
TITLE:	***The Saucier's Apprentice***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Inspector Marcel Riboflavin
LOCALE:	Paris, France
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*A few writers in each generation can be called "sui generis"—they have their own individual style. Surely S. J. Perelman is one of that highly gifted group . . .*

THE LAST PLACE I WOULD HAVE expected to run into Marcel Riboflavin *sous-inspecteur* of the Police Judiciaire—which is to say the Sûreté—was the Sunday-morning bird market in Paris but then Marcel's vagaries have long since ceased to surprise me. Stoop to tie your shoelace in Baton Rouge or Bombay, in Dublin or Dar es Salaam, and like as not you will find Marcel confronting you with an owlish eye and nibbling a meditative praline.

Where he gets all those meditative pralines from—or why, since they attract a veritable canopy of flies—the Lord only knows; nonetheless, there he is in rusty bourgeois black, patiently following up some infinitesimal clue, or like as not just nibbling a praline.

I was standing in the hurly-burly of the bird market three Sundays ago, lost in admiration of two little doves in georgette blouses who would have rounded out any boy's aviary, when an unmistakable voice sounded in my ear.

"Doucement, mon vieux," it warned. "We old roosters must be cautious. Don't try to outwit your arteries."

Startled I turned to behold Marcel, wagging his forefinger at me. It was quite apparent what he was thinking, and I hastened to disabuse him.

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"The fact is," I explained, "the smaller of that pair—the helpless-looking one—reminds me of a teacher of mine at grammar school, a Miss Floggerty. She had taffy-colored hair, as I recall—"

"Bien sûr, bien sûr," he said sympathetically. "I, too, have those symptoms of senility. Tragic but inescapable. Come, let us link arms and stroll through the complex of alleys fringing the Quartier Latin."

As we linked arms and strolled, genially updating each other on our activities since our last meeting, I noticed a strangely familiar magazine protruding from my friend's coat pocket.

"You have symptoms of gentility also," I remarked. "Since when have you taken to reading *Harper's Bazaar?* Or do your investigations extend into the gilded salons of the *haute couture?"*

Marcel's face, or at least that portion of it visible through the flies, suddenly became cryptic.

"In my post, one is called on to unravel many tangled skeins," he said evasively. "By the way, this café we are nearing is reputed to have the worst anisette in Paris. Shall we try it?"

We did, and it was unspeakable. After a moment Marcel withdrew a praline from a recess in his clothing and nibbled it meditatively. I am not overly intuitive, but I have learned that when sub-inspectors of the Sûreté with dickty fashion magazines protruding from their pockets invite one to share an apéritif, curious stories ofttimes unfold, and so it proved . . .

"As you are doubtless aware," began Marcel, drawing on his praline, *"Harper's Bazaar* not only prognosticates the mode but frequently publishes news of consuming interest—you will pardon the play on words—to gourmets. Such was the arresting article you see here."

He spread out the periodical and indicated a piece entitled *Sauces from the Source,* by Rosamund Frost.

At first glance it did not seem particularly cataclysmic. Maxim's, the celebrated Paris restaurant, had confected five basic frozen sauces calculated to tease the American palate. It was the secrecy attending their manufacture, however, and the abnormal precautions adopted to guard the creators, that riveted my attention. "Seat of the production," wrote Miss Frost, conspiratorially turning up the collar of her typewriter, "is Seabrook Farms in New Jersey, the well-known purveyors of frozen fruit and vegetables. But because Monsieur and Madame Vaudable, owners of the Paris Maxim's, have a deep distrust of American cooking methods, they have evolved their own system of preparation. For each large batch of sauces a head chef, an assistant, and several *sauciers* are flown over from Paris, to be held virtually incommunicado in New Jersey until

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the batch is finished. They are then flown home before they have had any chance to be contaminated by such ill practices as thickening with flour."

I lifted my eyes slowly to Marcel's, the question I was almost afraid to put into words muted to whisper. 'You mean . . ." I asked.

"Precisely," he said, dislodging a grain of sugar from his denture. "Scarcely a month after this information appeared, the chief of our Bureau Culinaire, the section specializing in food outrages, sent for me in a state of pronounced agitation. A few nights earlier, faint but indisputable traces of flour had been detected in a pipkin of sauce béarnaise served at Maxim's."

"It could have been pure coincidence," I objected. "A harassed scullion, a sudden avalanche of orders—"

"In France," Marcel said with wintry dignity, "accidents occur in the bedroom, not the kitchen. No, it was all too plain that this was a deliberate, predetermined *coup de main,* a perfidious assault on the very citadel of our national cuisine. The victim of the atrocity, it appeared, was a distinguished artist of the Comédie-Française and one of its foremost tragedians, Isidor Bassinet. Providentially, Bassinet realized the implications of his discovery in time to avert a panic that might easily have wrought havoc among the clientele. Summoning the maître d'hôtel, he cuttingly suggested that the sauce was more suitable for calking a boat, tweaked the man's nose, and retired. The headwaiter, of course, relayed the gibe to the chef, who instituted a probe forthwith and immediately gave us the alert."

"I hesitate to denigrate an actor," I said, hesitating almost a full second, "but might not Bassinet himself have insinuated flour into the sauce as the pretext for a histrionic outburst?"

"We did not discount the possibility," said Marcel. "A clandestine search was made of his rooms that yielded naught incriminating gravywise; his erotic photomurals, his collection of whips, and the jar of candied hashish by his bedside could have belonged to any floorwalker in the Bon Marché. The longer I pondered the problem, the more convinced I became it was an inside job. Someone on the kitchen force—whether a madman or a cold, diabolic intelligence I was not yet prepared to say—had engineered the deed, and I knew that, encouraged by success, he would strike again.

"My theory was vindicated all too swiftly. Two evenings later, Alexander Satyriasis, the Greek shipping magnate, was dining at Maxim's with his wife and his mistress. The occasion was their silver wedding anniversary, and Satyriasis, an epicurean, had left no spit unturned to insure a gastronomical triumph. The hors d'oeuvres,

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the soup, the roast—all were transcendent. Then, as the trio expectantly attacked the salad, Paradise crumbled about their ears. Under their forks lay the ultimate annihilation the final obscenity—a canned pear stuffed with cream cheese and walnuts, garnished with cole slaw and Russian dressing."

"Good God!" I exclaimed. "At the Fig 'n Thistle, yes; at the Mumble Shop and the Stygian tearooms, yes; but in the Rue Royale—"

Marcel repressed an involuntary shudder. "It was appalling," he admitted. "When I got there, the table was cordoned off and Satyriasis had not yet recovered consciousness. He came around eventually, but, *entre nous,* the man will never be the same. I instantly fell to work and grilled the entire personnel, from the head sommelier down to the doorman. Nobody would even hazard a guess at the origin of the salads; apparently they had been slipped onto the service tray while the waiter's back was turned, and beyond that not a vestige of a clue.

"Those were dark days, I can tell you," Marcel went on somberly. "The knowledge that we were powerless to combat him exhilarated our mysterious adversary, spurring him on to new and more gruesome excesses. Under the management's very nose, patrons were assailed with baked grapefruit topped with maraschino cherries, fried clams encapsulated in deep fat, mashed potatoes pullulating with marshmallow whip. The nadir of bestiality was reached one night when cards were surreptitiously pinned to the menu inviting diners to have their tea leaves read by a gypsy palmist."

"Forgive me for underscoring the obvious," I said. "Surely it must have occurred to you that a woman, and patently an American, was at the bottom of all this?"

"Naturally," said Marcel with a shade of impatience. "The crucial question, though, was where was she and how was she effecting her depredations? Five of the restaurant's employees, as you saw from the magazine account, had been flown to New Jersey and held there incommunicado. Plainly, one of their number—younger and more impressionable than the rest—had evaded his custodians and succumbed to some harpy who had lured the fatuous boy to a drive-in like those Howard Monsoon places that line your roads, and there, befuddled by viscous malted drinks and chicken-in-the-basket, he had been persuaded to betray his birthright. In all likelihood, I reasoned, the seductress had followed him to Paris to gloat over her handiwork; perhaps, if I could ferret out the cat's-paw, he might lead me to her.

"Acting on my presentiment, I at once attached myself to the kitchen in the guise of an assistant pastry chef and proceeded to elicit what I could about the quintet who had been overseas."

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"And your hypothesis bore fruit?"

"In a fashion I never anticipated," replied Marcel. "Four of them were prosaic, stodgy types—family men whose world revolved around their thimbleful of Pernod and their game of bowls. The youngest, however, was an altogether different piece of work. A mere novice entrusted with handling condiments, he was a shy, secretive lad with long eyelashes and a curiously girlish aspect. Whenever the badinage among his mates grew ribald, he flushed deeply and made himself scarce, and once or twice I surprised him examining his complexion in a compact.

"The conviction that our little colleague was a masquerader emboldened me to experiment. Utilizing the test that had unmasked Huckleberry Finn, I casually asked the youth to thread a needle. As I expected, he brought the thread to the needle instead of vice versa. Then I shied an egg beater at him without warning—that is, without warning that I was shying an egg beater at him—and, sure enough, he automatically spread the knees under his apron to form a lap.

"The evidence was too damning to be ignored. That night, when my suspect let himself into his modest furnished room in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés quarter, stripped off his mess jacket, and disclosed a brassière, I emerged from an armoire and sprang my little trap."

"You might have waited a moment or two for confirmation" I remonstrated.

"As a reader of *Harper's Bazaar*, I am reasonably *au courant* with the subject," said Marcel tartly. "Besides, I had all the proof necessary to stamp the creature as the perpetrator of the crimes. Simmering on the gas stove was a dish of salmon croquettes flanked by carrots and peas, and in the oven beneath, a graham-cracker pie. Overcome by remorse, yet grateful that the suspense had ended, the fair culprit dissolved in tears.

"Her name, she confessed, was Gristede Feigenspan, and she was a feature writer for *Effluvia* a periodical circulated gratis by supermarkets in your country. To dramatize the pre-eminence of American cookery, her editors had abducted the youngest member of the French contingent, had substituted Gristede, and were planning to publicize her exploits under the title *I Was a Fake Saucier at Maxim's.*"

I drew a long breath. "A singular tale," I commented. "I take it she paid the inevitable price for her audacity?"

"That," said Marcel, with an enigmatic smile, "is a matter of opinion." He hoisted himself cumbrously to his feet as a dynamic young woman in black jodphurs with a bag slung over her shoulder, gravitated toward our table. "I don't think you know my wife," he

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said. "Gristede, allow me to present an old *copain* from the States—a journalist, like yourself."

"Too, too fantastic," she trilled, extending her hand. "How long are you staying in Paris? You must come to dinner."

"I—er—I'm just en route to Beirut," I stammered. "I mean I'm off to a fiesta in Trieste—"

"Don't be an Airedale," she said forcefully. "We'll give you a real home-cooked meal. Hasn't Marcel told you about my noodles Yankee Doodle, smothered in peanut butter and mayonnaise?"

I looked at Marcel, but his face, flies and all, had turned to stone. That's the trouble with these garrulous French detectives—they're unpredictable. One moment they wring their dossiers inside out for you, and then—*pouf!*—they shut up like a clam.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**CHARLES B. CHILD**
TITLE:	***The Thumbless Man***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Inspector Chafik
LOCALE:	Akkar, Iraq
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*One of Inspector Chafik's finest cases: a corpse dead 4000 years but with a modern knife in its back; a chukar hunt; and an impossible murder in a lost city . . .*

THE POLICE SERGEANT AND THE INspector knelt beside the first corpse. The sergeant said, "Sir, this one has been dead four thousand years, but in its back there is a modern knife."

It was cool here in the vaulted chamber, but outside, the sun beat down on the treeless plains of Iraq and on the dun-colored remains of Akkar, an ancient city recently uncovered by archeologists.

The Inspector flicked ash from his cigarette. "My dear Abdullah," he answered the sergeant. "We of the Baghdad police should concern ourselves solely with corpses of our era. The recent stabbing of this long-dead one is desecration, not murder. However, I am intrigued and you did right to serve up this gentleman as appetizer."

He touched his forehead in a salaam to the figure between them; it had the substance of leather and was blackened by the bituminous soil that had preserved it. Burial had been made in a squatting position with arms wrapped around the legs. Elaborate ornaments of lapis lazuli, crystal, and carnelian were scattered around, and fragments of a robe, stiff with gold embroidery, still clung to the remains.

The knife between the shoulder blades, incongruously, had a cheap wooden handle.

"English manufacture," said Sergeant Abdullah. "Imported, sir, and sold mainly to tribesmen."

© 1955 by Charles B. Child; originally titled, "The Invisible Killer."

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He was interrupted by an exclamation from his superior, who had focused a powerful reflector lamp on the body.

"Observe the small strong bones, the delicately shaped hands and feet!" cried the little man. "Note the head, overlarge for his otherwise perfect proportions! The wide brow, the hollow cheeks, the pointed chin, the sharp high-bridged nose! He was a handsome man, his height about five feet five and his weight possibly one hundred and thirty pounds. Whom do you see, Abdullah?"

The sergeant said in a shocked voice, "I see you, sir!"

"Yes! Myself! Chafik J. Chafik as he would be if miraculously preserved after death. But this is really only of passing interest," he said, and the flush faded from his swarthy cheeks. "This man begat my race yesterday and is as forgotten as I will be tomorrow."

He passed a cigarette to his assistant and then chose one for himself. The flame of the match made dancing points of light in his flat, neutral-colored eyes. The sergeant, who was massive, sat and waited as patiently as the dead man beside them.

"Well?" the Inspector asked.

"Sir, I will brief you concerning the other corpse. It is that of Mr. Jamil Goury."

Chafik said impatiently, "That information was given me before I left Baghdad." He went on to quote from his memory of records: "Goury, Jamil. Age thirty-three. Unmarried. Educated at the Oriental Institute, Beirut. Formerly an assistant curator at The Iraq Museum. Appointed field representative to the Department of Antiquities in 1952. Brilliant. High-strung and inclined to nervousness. Yes, yes! I know all about Mr. Goury—except how he died."

"He was strangled."

"And where did it happen?"

"Here, sir, in the passageway to the tomb." Sergeant Abdullah indicated the shaft the excavators had dug into the tomb. It was narrow, and one section could be passed only by crawling. "It was there that he died," Abdullah went on. "The bruises on the throat resemble those made by powerful hands. Yet there was nobody in the tomb to strangle him except this dead gentleman."

"Do you accuse my ancestor?" Chafik asked mischievously.

Abdullah looked at the Inspector reproachfully.

"Who else was present when Goury died?" Chafik asked.

"There was Dr. Anton, sir—he is head of the expedition. And there was Mr. Garwith, a New Zealander who is his assistant. Also the doctor's wife, Gisela Anton, and Mahomet Kubba, the foreman. Many workers, sir—at least, fifty."

"A surfeit of witnesses is as bad as none at all," complained the Inspector. He leaned forward to look at the knife in the back of his an-

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cestor. "And the hand that did this was not seen either?"

"Nobody knows how it got there."

They sat in silence. The body that had sat for four thousand years threw a shadow on the brick wall of the tomb; and the shadow was shaped like a question mark.

"I find it cold here," Inspector Chafik said to Abdullah at last. "Let us go seek the sun."

"Yes, sir. I also find it cold, yet I perspire," the sergeant said.

They crawled out. The Inspector, who was leading, stopped in the narrowest part of the shaft and examined a forked twig partly covered by sand. It had been broken recently and he recognized it as peach wood; yet no peaches grew at Akkar these days, and the gardens of Baghdad were thirty miles away.

He said, "This is as old a relic as the other, and even better preserved —it is greener."

Still lying in the narrow shaft, he picked up a lead pellet the size of a small bead and wondered for what purpose it had been cut with a groove. Then, crawling on, the back of his jacket caught on something and ripped. Freeing himself, Chafik damned the unknown relations of the unknown man who had long ago driven a bronze hook into the brick that formed the roof of the tunnel.

Light blinded the Inspector as he crawled out into the sun. He brushed his clothes and was soothed by the familiar scene. Columns of dust, raised by the wind, danced over the drab, empty plains. On the horizon, date palms stood along the winding course of the Euphrates. And above was the copper shield of the sky.

He was a devout Moslem, and half aloud he chanted to himself from the Koran: "By the noonday brightness and by the night when it darkeneth, the Lord has not forsaken thee!"

Dr. Julius Anton, who headed the expedition, was a big blond man of vigorous middle years. He had a short beard streaked with gray, and tufted eyebrows shaded his blue eyes. His hands were strong and square and grimed by the rubble of the city he had resurrected. The streets of Akkar and the foundations of buildings were all around him, monumental evidence of his patience and enthusiasm.

The archeologist was an Austrian who had dug in various parts of the Middle East before the second World War. Politically, as Inspector Chafik knew, Anton had been a neutral.

Anton spoke brusquely in English. "I trust you have not touched anything down there. We have not yet catalogued the finds."

Chafik answered precisely, "I prefer to let sleeping ancestors lie."

The archeologist stared, then

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rned to his wife and said, "Do
u not see the likeness, Gisela?
he Inspector is a throwback to an-
her age!"

Mrs. Anton had a fair and gentle
auty. She was small, a figurine in
rcelain, and considerably young-
than her husband. The Inspector
ndered at her lack of vivacity as
bowed over her hand; her touch
is as timid as the brush of a
oth's wing.

He said, "Madame!" ardently,
d was rewarded with a smile.

"My husband is very rude," Gi-
a Anton said.

"To call me a throwback? But I
! Oh, I assure you, madame, I
o see myself as a curiosity walk-
."

Her hand was withdrawn, and
e life that had been kindled by
gallantry flickered out. "So, an-
er scientific mind?" she asked
arily.

Dr. Anton said, "Please, Gisela!
ough! The Inspector does not
ke a social visit." He turned as a
n came up the ramp from the
avations, and then he said, "My
istant, Mr. Garwith."

The New Zealander was dwarfed
his chief. He had a sun-dried
e, deep-set gray eyes, and an odd-
twisted mouth. The thumb of his
t hand had been amputated and
car on his arm suggested a war
und. Garwith greeted Chafik
th an indifferent nod, and then
manner softened as he turned
Gisela Anton and said, "I've un-
covered some pre-Amorite pottery,
might be Sumerian—we're getting
down to that level. Wish you'd go
take a look." When she hesitated he
added, "Please?" and she turned to
go.

Richard Garwith's expression as
he watched her walk away was
gentle, and he said, "We don't want
her here when we talk about Jamil
Goury."

Dr. Anton said, "Foolishness,
Richard! Inspector Chafik wishes
to question her."

"What d'you want to know about
the Rabbit?" Garwith asked Cha-
fik.

"Rabbit? I do not quite compre-
hend."

"Goury was a timid bloke, so are
rabbits," Garwith explained.

"My records say he was high-
strung—" Garwith gave a short
laugh and the Inspector asked au-
thoritatively, "High-strung or tim-
id, how did he die?"

Garwith said, "We were all going
in. Goury was leading. He didn't
as a rule, but I'd teased him—"

Dr. Anton interrupted, "You
were inconsiderate, Richard. Goury
was frightened of the mummy. It is
not a true mummy, of course, In-
spector—your people, the ancient
people, had no cult of the dead, as
had the Egyptians. The preserva-
tion of the one in the tomb was ac-
cidental—"

Inspector Chafik said impatient-
ly, "The soil of my country is pro-
ductive of more history than crops.

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Kindly tell me how Goury died."

Anton shrugged and said, "We were crawling through the narrow part of the shaft. I was behind Goury. The lights went out—"

"Somebody stumbled over the power cable and unplugged it from the generator," Garwith explained. "There were a dozen of us in the shaft at the time: the doctor in front of me, Gisela in back, then Mahomet Kubba and a party of workers. All of a sudden it was blacker than hell down there."

"The horror has begun," Julius Anton said, his command of English giving way as he recalled the horror. "Goury has cried, 'Let go!' Never have I such fear heard! And then he has pulled back, and then has thrown himself forward."

"Why forward?" asked Chafik.

The archeologist threw up his hands. "Perhaps to grasp the enemy. But then Goury has jerked; his legs have thrashed, like he is being choked. Awful!"

Garwith was calmer and took over the story. "Goury fought something down there—I'm sure of that. But the shaft was so narrow we couldn't see what held him. Dr. Anton tried to haul him out—"

"By the legs, hopeless," said Anton, calmer now. "I could not move him. Someone—something held him fast. And then his body became limp. I reached over him to grapple with whatever was holding him. Nothing was there! And then all at once he was free."

"There is no other way into th tomb?"

"Positively none, Inspector! Fu thermore, my foolhardy assistar Richard, went in—"

"Nothing there except the blaste mummy!" Garwith said.

"Had my ancestor been stabbed asked Chafik.

Garwith rubbed his jaw with h mutilated left hand. "No," he sai

"Yet the knife was there an ho later," Anton said. He became a gry and stared about at the ruir "As if I did not have enough tro ble!"

"Ah, yes," Chafik said. "Rum —always an unreliable witness has informed me you are stoppir work here, Doctor."

Anton's expression was angr "What can I do! The foundatic that was financing my dig has wit drawn funds. They claim I spe too much. My life's work!"

The Inspector was familiar wi the shrill voice of fanaticism a thought: If only this man sav some of his emotion for his wi Aloud he said sympathetically, "I deed, much money is needed for army of workers. Have any of yo men deserted since the murder?

"Only one, a man we call Chukar," Anton said.

"Chukar is the name for o Middle Eastern partridge," the I spector said, frowning.

Dr. Anton laughed. "Exactly, th man has the scuttling run of t partridge. Not quite right in t

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head—'touched by God,' you call it in your Arabic. He was Goury's servant."

Garwith said, "Whatever El Chukar was, he was devoted to Goury. He probably took to the ruins to be alone with his grief."

Chafik said dryly, "We of the Middle East enjoy grief, Mr. Garwith. Therefore I find his man's disappearance odd, and a chukar hunt is in order. And now excuse me, I have an appointment with the recently dead. I am always at the beck of somebody's corpse," he added plaintively and applied a handkerchief saturated with orange water to his fastidious nose.

The dead man lay on a canvas cot in one of the tents. The Inspector, who was not easily shocked, exclaimed when he saw the body, "This was not a tidy killing!"

"No, sir. I, too, was disturbed," Sergeant Abdullah said.

"He looks like one badly hanged," the Inspector said. "The throat is discolored and lacerated. What opinion did you form?"

"Sir, the hands that strangled him were of exceptional hardness. One might almost say they were fleshless—"

The Inspector, who had been bending over the corpse, abruptly straightened and seized his assistant by the throat. "What do you feel?" he demanded.

"Chiefly, sir, I feel—your thumbs," gasped Abdullah.

Chafik released him. "The grip used in strangulation relies upon the thumbs—the bruises they make are deeper than those left by fingers," he said. "With this in mind I suggest you look again at Mr. Goury."

The sergeant obeyed. "I do not observe the contusions that you described, sir, and that doubtlessly appear on my own throat. Pressure on the dead man's throat was equal at all points of contact, so it would appear that the strangler lacked thumbs."

"I am of that opinion, too, Abdullah," Inspector Chafik said and stepped out of the tent.

Akkar was dominated by a ziggurat, a vast pyramid of moldering brick which had once been topped by a shrine. There the sacrificial fire had burned for the twofold purpose of propitiating the gods and guiding caravans that voyaged on the vast plains. Now there were no gods and no travelers. Inspector Chafik stood atop the ziggurat and stared down at the unearthed city below.

"An eerie place," complained the sergeant, climbing up to join the Inspector.

"A graveyard at dusk always is, but here we are free from those who might eavesdrop. Was the chukar hunt successful?"

"No, sir, a dozen men searched diligently, but they did not find Mr. Goury's servant."

"We must widen the search—he

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may have fled to a village. Did you inquire into the marital relationship of Dr. Anton and his charming wife?"

"Yes, sir, most discreetly. The doctor is cold toward her."

"Wine and women, when left standing, become sour, although in this case another man appreciates the vintage and would sip."

"Yet the husband, this time, seems quite disinterested," Abdullah said, a note of surprise in his voice. "On the other hand, Mr. Garwith only recently fought with the deceased—"

"Do you suggest Mr. Garwith was jealous?" the Inspector said sharply. "I am sure that Mrs. Anton did nothing to bring about a quarrel between rival lovers."

"I confess to inaccuracy, sir. It is true she spurned the attentions of Jamil Goury, whose reputation with women is public gossip."

"Let him keep his reputation—he no longer has his life. The essential fact is that Gisela Anton is a virtuous little moth." And then he added harshly, "Ah, you fool!"

"Sir!" the sergeant said indignantly.

Chafik patted his arm. "I addressed the husband who has taken this lost city as mistress."

He sat with his arms folded around his knees, in the pose of his ancestor in the nearby tomb. He rocked as he sat, and noted that the dusk had created a mirage: out of the desert sprang a forest.

"What happened at Akkar?" he asked his assistant.

The sergeant said, "Sir, my knowledge of history is insufficient to—"

Inspector Chafik broke in impatiently, "My question referred to today's yesterday, Abdullah, not to yesterday's yesterday."

Abdullah nodded. "You refer to eleven years ago, a date in the second of the World Wars, when enemy units dropped from the skies and landed near here."

"They were saboteurs," Chafik said, taking over the story. "They had excellent geographical knowledge of our land, but they were not well informed about our people. They thought they could bribe our tribal princes with gold. Although they failed and were arrested, nobody ever found their gold."

"No, sir," the sergeant said. "I remember well the parachuted containers of their supplies which fell into our hands. But no gold, sir."

Preoccupied, Chafik got up and started to climb down the ruins of the ziggurat, stepping carefully in the darkness. When he had gone a little way he stopped, rooted by fear, as a grotesque shadow reared before him.

In shape it was human, but the way it moved was not. Chafik, who was unarmed, cursed the darkness and his imagination; then he told himself, fear is an expression of disbelief in God's hereafter, and he closed in for attack.

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The shadow had substance, and the Inspector was encouraged until he realized the inequality of his strength. He broke the hold, shouted, "Abdullah!" and felt the hands seize his throat once again. There was a roaring in his ears, the stars above him seemed to leap like flames of wind-blown torches, and then suddenly there was peace . . .

When he came back from the place of peace and darkness, Chafik was aware of pain in his throat. He opened his eyes and saw the soft glow of a lamp, not the flames of the stars, the anxious face of a woman, not the shadowy form that had attacked him.

"Madame Gisela!" The exclamation tortured his raw throat. He looked about and saw that he was in his tent in Anton's camp. "I did not die here. My corpse should not have been moved," he said.

The laugh that answered him was a caress, as was the voice that said, "Now I know you have recovered!"

Chafik's senses cleared. "The illusion of death was pardonable. I thought angels administered," he said gallantly, and his hand went to his neck where something rested lightly.

"That compress will soon take away the bruises," Gisela said.

"So cool," Chafik said, closing his eyes.

"They think it was Goury's servant who attacked you out there, the one we call El Chukar—" She stopped and then asked in a frightened voice, "What is is, Inspector?"

"Throats, bruises, compresses, intereference with evidence!" he rasped, as he threw away the cloth. "Who did this? Bring me a mirror!"

Rudely he snatched the compact the woman brought and tilted the small glass to examine his neck. "Thumbs!" he said.

"What?"

"Thumbs, thumbs! I looked for thumbless man!" Chafik shouted.

The violence of his own voice startled him, and he stammered, "Madame—I—" He saw her face grow pale as she stared beyond him toward the tent door. He turned his head and saw the canvas flap being raised by a maimed hand.

"Richard," whispered Gisela Anton.

And then Julius Anton came into the tent, saying, "Such a shocking event to have happen in *my* Akkar!" He was followed by Abdullah and Richard Garwith.

"Sir," the sergeant said to Chafik, "your alleged attacker escaped but—"

"Let me rest!" Chafik shouted, turning to the tent wall.

The sergeant ushered the others out and showed no surprise when he returned and found the Inspector sitting cross-legged on the cot, nursing the inevitable cigarette.

"I had to get rid of them and I have always admired myself as an actor," Chafik said.

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He was very tense and the sergeant recognized the symptoms and waited at attention. Presently the Inspector looked up from the objects laid out before him: a broken twig from a peach tree, the coat that he had ripped on the bronze hook in the tomb of his ancestor, and a bead of lead, deeply grooved.

"These are threads with which I must weave," he said, "and this is another"—he touched his lacerated throat.

"There is, of course, a thread that I shall have to reproduce. Also, we must add the psychology of these people, their passions and ambitions—" He stopped, and then said harshly, "The pattern I weave is hideous, but it is so with all murder. And the solution will be equally terrible." The rasp of command was in his voice as he went on, "Find me a length of wire, Abdullah. Thin and very strong. Find it discreetly. One of our drivers should have what I want in his tool kit."

"Yes, sir."

"Send a man to the nearest orchard and cut me a forked switch from a peach tree. A fast car should take him to the gardens of Baghdad and back in an hour.

"Finally, there is to be an alarm at dawn, Abdullah. The men should fire carbines and run shouting to the tomb of the man who died so long ago. Let them stop there; let nobody enter."

Six hours later, Inspector Chafik stubbed out his final cigarette, adjusted the knot of his tie, combed his smooth black hair, put on his *sidarah,* and went out. The flap of the tent closed behind him and he stood for a moment looking at the ruins of Akkar, tinted pink by the sunrise.

The sharp crackle of police carbines stirred the Inspector and he hurried to join his men, who stood guarding the entrance to the tomb. Watchdogs barked in Anton's camp and the archeologist hurried out from his tent, a coat thrown over pajamas.

"What has happened?" Anton called, running toward the tomb. Garwith followed close behind him.

Chafik said, "Somebody, something, went down there into the tomb."

"There are devils in my Akkar!" Anton said. "Richard, the generator! Give us light! Come," he said to Chafik. "The one you call your ancestor is to me the crown of my Akkar, and already he is damaged with a knife."

The generator started and the lights came on. Dr. Anton went into the tomb, followed by the Inspector. Garwith, who ran to join them, was crowded aside by Abdullah; as always the sergeant was officious when his natural place was challenged. A file of policemen and workers formed the afterguard.

And then Gisela Anton appeared and was ordered back by a corpo-

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ral, who said, "Madame, I have orders to escort you to your tent and guard you." He was deaf to her protests and led her away.

Inside the shaft the men began to crawl forward. As the passage narrowed, Anton called back, "Careful."

Behind him, Chafik said softly, 'Here Jamil Goury died." He felt for the cable along the wall, yanked on it, and the lights flickered. Impatiently he signaled again, and this died, and the tunnel was plunged into darkness.

"Gott!" Anton cried out and tried to draw back. His legs thrashed and he cried again, *"Gott, lieber Gott!"* And then he scrabbled forward to fight what was there in the darkness. The sounds he made were those of a man who was strangling.

Chafik seized the thrashing legs. Reaching over the Inspector, Abdullah gripped Anton's ankles and said, "I have him, sir."

The Inspector said urgently, "Release the pressure! Do not kill him!" And then he said to the strangling man, "Jamil Goury was called a rabbit, but there are other animals that kick and thrash when caught in the hunter's noose. Tell me why you killed him!"

Anton gasped and Garwith shouted, "Let him go, you devil!"

Chafik said grimly, "The devil and I have much in common. But you, Mr. Garwith, should be thinking of the lady. She will need you more than ever when our work here is finished," he added sadly.

Once again he spoke to Anton, saying, "You will tell me how Jamil Goury died. Confession is essential to our law." The doctor did not answer and Chafik said to Abdullah, "Encourage him to speak."

"Enough," Anton gasped. "He died like this."

"Why was his death essential?"

"Because—because—"

"Because you found the gold brought here by the Nazi parachutists so many years ago?" asked Chafik.

"Ja, ja," Anton choked. "Let me go. I will tell you."

The Inspector said, "So you found the gold in the tomb, where the parachutists had hidden it. You needed this gold for your mistress Akkar, and Jamil Goury knew you had found it. So he had to die. Perhaps you had prior knowledge the gold was here, perhaps the Nazis used you during the war—but it is of no importance, that war is forgotten.

"But what is not forgotten is how you killed a man with a rabbit's snare, how you hauled on his legs to 'save' him," Chafik went on. "Like this—" Savagely he pulled on the doctor's legs and the harsh sound of choking filled the tunnel.

"A rabbit's snare," the Inspector repeated, "a noose of wire weighted with lead beads—possibly bullets from a gun—carefully spaced like the fingers of a hand, a hand with-

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out thumbs. Such a neat way to conceal an obvious imprint of a wire. And then you used a twig of peach to trigger this contraption, so that the rabbit, entering, would blunder against it and drop the noose around his own neck. You prepared for him such a horror here in the darkness as I prepared for you. But *I* am merciful, I shall not wait for you to die, Dr. Anton. Turn on the lights!" he ordered.

When the lights came on, Chafik reached over the feebly struggling man and loosened the wire noose. Then he unfastened it from the bronze hook on which he had once torn his jacket. "I shall not hide my noose as you concealed yours when you so lovingly removed Jamil Goury's body. But I wonder at your carelessness in not salvaging the broken peach twig, and the lead bead that became detached from the wire."

They took Anton out into the early-morning light. Through the streets of the ruined city came a small patrol of police, escorting a man who moved with the scuttle of a running partridge.

Chafik said, "Ah, so the chukar hunt is ended."

He went to them and said, "Be gentle. This poor man, befuddled with grief and superstition, went into the tomb after the crime and stabbed my ancestor. His poor brain thought that the hands of a man dead four thousands years had taken his master's life."

Wearily Inspector Chafik turned to Richard Garwith and said gently, "Go to the lady. When this cloud of horror has lifted, may she find a silver lining."

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We'll tell you more about the author when we bring you Mr. Neal's next story—because we sure hope there will be other tall tales of Okfuskee County, U.S.A.

A MATTER OF EXPERT OPINION

by H. C. NEAL

CLYDE CLAIBORNE WASN'T EXACTLY what you'd call a prominent civic leader in the dusty little prairie town of Struggleville, Oklahoma, back there in 1898. What he was, he was just about the finest judge of white lightning whiskey that Okfuskee County ever produced. He was the puredee champion, and no two ways about it.

Clyde could sip a few drams of any sample jar of moonshine and right away deduce all sorts of astounding facts about the parent batch of that particular panther juice.

It was plumb amazing.

But since his talents were those of deduction rather than prediction, Clyde could have had no inkling of what this remarkable wizardry was going to lead him up to on that unforgettable day in July.

On the memorable day in question, Clyde and a bunch of the community's better bass fishermen and 'coon hunters were playing pot-limit poker in the back room of the feed store.

I was allowed to spectate, since I was going on twelve years old and had learned to keep my mouth shut unless spoken to. Besides, me and Clyde had been friends for a mighty long while.

I was but a freckle-faced tad at the time, and it pleasured Clyde to take me along to one of his se-

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cret potholes on Nuyaka Creek where he could tie me into a he-hoss bass most any time he took a notion.

He was a bachelor, Clyde was, a big bluff easy-going type of gent who looked life right in the eye and spit in its face if he seen fit. Then he'd go ahead and do whatever he aimed to do all along. Folks around Struggleville said Clyde didn't give a hoot if school kept or not.

"A fellow don't pass this way but once," he remarked one day as we were rigging up for a fishing trip, "and he'd ought to take his enjoys whenever they happen along."

Clyde was gentle with hunting hounds and small boys, but he sure played a plumb fierce hand of poker. That's what he was doing on the day this all happened, when Stash Wilson come walking into the back room of the feed store with a dirty crock under his arm.

"Clyde," said Stash, kinda breathless-like, walking right up to the table, "look what I dug up in my pasture this morning. This jug has got the finest, smoothest white lightning in it I ever lapped a lip acrost. I'd puredee 'preciate your opinion on it."

Stash Wilson was a saving kind of fellow and folks told it all over the county that he had pots of money buried on his place. But I had never found any when I snuck into his pasture to dig around. For fishing worms, you understand.

Important as the poker game was, Clyde recognized Stash's announcement as a bounden call to duty for an expert moonshine analyst, so he laid aside his cards and reached for the jug.

The other players grinned around, laid their cards down, and settled back expectantly to watch Clyde go to work.

He uncorked the jug, sniffed the contents carefully, and then took a small experimental sip. He rolled the golden liquid around on his tongue, eased it slowly down his throat, and without yet speaking, took another sip. While we all watched and waited, he sighed, swallowed the second sip—tasting real hard all the while—then finally spoke out.

"Well, Stash," he declared, grinning like a bluejay which has been invited by mistake to a junebug revival, "that is without no doubt the smoothest whiskey I have ever squished again my gum. It is sixteen year old if it is a day."

Everybody grinned, mostly in anticipation of some communal analysis. Everybody, that is, except a tall, lanky cadaverous-looking stranger who'd been sitting in on the poker game. I'd been watching him pretty close, and near as I could figure, he stood about forty dollars down in the play with Clyde being the biggest winner.

This muley-minded gent carried a Colt smokepole in the side pocket of his frock coat, I'd noticed, and

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all in all he appeared about as easy-going as a rattlesnake with a belly-ache.

"I'll sample that lightning, Mister," he said to Clyde, real hard-like. "Yore pronouncement plumb intrigues me."

Since it was Clyde's habit to give courtesy in return for the opposite, he smiled easy and says, "Be my guest."

Gripping up the jug, the stranger sniffed deeply and tilted it to his mouth. Just like Clyde had done, he rolled the sample around on his tongue awhile before drizzling it down his throat. Then he set the jug down careful and wiped his mouth with the backside of his hand.

"I'd say that 'shine was poured in that jug at least twenty year ago," he remarked. He said it right at Clyde like it was sort of a tentative challenge.

"It's possible," Clyde responded with a gentle smile. "That would have been along in '78," he mused. "About mid-August," he added to no one in particular.

"In the afternoon," the challenger retorted right back, "with a thunderhead building up in the southwest. I can taste the dampness that was in the air that day." This detailed sally brought a gasp of surprise from the onlookers, even though they recognized it as pure speculation and probably a bluff.

Clyde didn't say anything. He just looked steadily at the stranger for a minute, then silently reached for the jug and took another long slow sip, swallowing real deliberate.

"I imagine," said Clyde, "that the man cooked it hisself. Then when it was topped out, he stood watch on the ridge while his woman skimmed it off and poured it up. Furthermore," Clyde continued, shutting off the stranger who had tried to interrupt, "he used four parts hickory to one part bull pine in his cookfire."

This calm declaration made the crowd gasp even louder than they had before. It was apparent that Clyde regarded the stranger as a dangerous challenger and was going to uncommon length in his analysis. Even though he was the recognized A-Number One whiskey judger of Okfuskee County, he had never before went so far as to analyze the kindling ratio in the cookfire. It's a tricky proposition, really, with varied prairie breezes rustling lightly down the stilling draw from time to time. Bound to affect any cookfire, no matter how carefully built or tended.

"That's just the way I figgered," said the stranger doggedly, like he was agreeing that it was indeed a steel trap he had carelessly put his foot into.

"The woman who poured up this 'shine had a sizable wart on her chin," Clyde added, sort of off-hand-like.

"Bound to have," the stranger

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agreed quickly. A little too quickly, I figgered.

Stash Wilson was a little more excitable than some of the poker players. "How in the blue-eyed world you figger that, Clyde?" he demanded.

"Easy," Clyde rejoined. "The wart served as a drip-gather, drawing the sweat down her face. That makes the sweaty taste a mite stronger than when a smooth-faced woman does the pourin'."

The hard-looking stranger glared at Clyde just like a pregnant fox in a forest fire—trapped and desperate. Than after a moment, while Clyde looked steadily back at him, his face softened somewhat and he took another pull from Stash's jug. Setting it carefully on the table between them, he nodded, "They's a tola'ble difference between the taste of man-sweat and woman-sweat," he assented, "and that's woman-sweat all right."

This easy agreement should have lessened the tension building up in the sticky-hot storage room, but it didn't. My little bowlegged sister could have told you there was a battle brewing up between these two expert whiskey judgers. They were agreeing, all right, but it was like two scorpions agreeing that this desert ain't big enough for the two of them.

Clyde took another deliberate sip from the jug.

"Stash," he pronounced, "this moonshine would be just about puredee perfect if it warn't for the faint tinge of leather in the aftertaste." But he wasn't looking at Stash when he spoke, he was looking right square at his challenger.

Without taking his eyes off Clyde, the tall stranger proceeded to have him another pull at the jug. He again lingered long over the tasting, then set it down and looked around deliberately at every man in the place. Me, too. Then he glared back at Clyde.

"Mister," he grated, "there's a sure-God aftertaste in that moonshine, but it ain't leather. It's iron! It's puredee iron taste, and nothing else!"

This brought it out in the open and made the suspense thick enough to cut with a knife. This man had deliberately and barefacedly called the local champion wrong on his judgment of white-lightning whiskey. And Clyde Claiborne, easy-going as he was, sure wasn't the man to stand still for that.

Clyde didn't say one word for a little bit. Obviously making absolutely sure, he took another quick sip of the disputed liquor. He swallowed and looked squarely at the stranger while he said his say. "Something has throwed you off, Mister. There ain't a smidgen of iron taste in that whiskey. Its plumb leather, and nothing else."

"You callin' me a liar?" the tall man rasped.

Clyde spoke back flat and earnest

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like a preacher at a river baptizing. "I'm saying that liquor has leather in the aftertaste. If you say it's iron, then you're wrong."

The stranger flushed, stung to the quick. He leaped to his feet, upsetting the poker table, and whipped out his hawgleg. "Them's shootin' words!" he yelled.

"Don't get sudden, Mister," said Clyde, not moving. "I ain't never shot a human man in my life. And I'd pure hate to do it over a jug of moonshine whiskey. But I do know my lightning, and I don't crawfish —gun or no. So, if you're bound and determined to have some shootin', I'll ask you to tarry a mite while I go to the house and fetch my smokepole."

The stranger locked eyes with Clyde for a long moment, then lowered his gun barrel the tiniest bit.

"I'll be here," he growled.

Clyde stalked out with an expression on his face like our schoolmarm wore every fall. She knows the job won't be easy, but once the session starts there ain't hardly no way to stop it until it's over and done with.

I knew I'd get a skinning when I got home for hanging around there any longer, but I sure didn't want to miss the shooting. I sat tight just like everyone else until the distempered stranger went out in the street to wait for Clyde to come back. Then Stash and I and the rest of the crowd turned out onto the porch so as not to miss a thing.

Clyde was back in less time than it takes a harvest hand to down a dipper of spring water. He stopped about fifty foot up the street, his hands hanging loose at his side and his pistol tucked into his belt.

This other fellow was standing in the middle of the dusty sun-dappled street, right in front of the feed store. It got so quiet you could hear the hounds panting, lying in the shade of the horse trough around the corner.

"I'm ready," said Clyde in a firm tight voice.

They drew simultaneous and the big pistols roared like twin thunderclaps, touching off arguments that lasted for years about who fired first. It wasn't really important.

Clyde's head snapped back and even before he hit the ground we could see blood spurting from the stranger's breast pocket as he fell. They were both stone-dead before we broke and ran up to where they lay in the dust.

After a last long look at Clyde I turned away and stumbled blindly down behind the church. I hung over the whitewashed picket fence and got my crying done with while the doctor was laying them out for the funeral. And I didn't care who saw me, even if I was almost twelve years old. I was just puredee sick at seeing Clyde Claiborne get killed over whether that jug of whiskey

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had an iron or a leather aftertaste.

And that's about all there is to tell, I reckon.

Except for one other thing that happened later in the afternoon. I'd gone back to the feed store to get rid of Stash Wilson's whiskey jug before it could cause any more trouble.

When I picked it up and started out the back, I stumbled over a 'coon hound lying there beside a step and the jug was jolted right out of my arms. It landed smack against a rock, shattering to smithereens. The bit of whiskey left in it spread into a dark new puddle in the bone-dry soil.

And right in the middle of the puddle—glittering something fierce in the slanting afternoon sunlight—lay a leather-headed tack.

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THE CASE BOOK OF THE 52nd PRECINCT

Clancy and the Subway Jumper

by ROBERT L. PIKE

8:45 P.M. Clancy was watching the poker game in the squad room from a vantage point back of the players. In the one week since he had been transferred to the 52nd Precinct, he had not been able to win close friendship with the old-timers there. He was watching silently, not joining in the friendly banter that went around the table, feeling left out, when the sergeant called to him. He unhooked his heel from the chair rung he had been using for a support, and walked out to the desk.

"Yes, Sergeant?"

"A subway jumper over at the 86 IRT, Lieutenant."

"Any name?"

"No make on him yet, Lieutenant. Who do you want I should send?"

Clancy thought a minute. "I'll take it," he said, and went back into the squad room for his overcoat. "Work," he explained to the inquiring faces.

"That nasty four-letter word," Stanton said. "What's up?"

"A jumper over at the 86 IRT."

"Want I should go with you, Lieutenant?" Kaproski asked.

"No, I'll take it," Clancy said.

"Better wear boots, Lieutenant," Stanton said, peaking at his hole card. "They're pretty messy sometimes."

"Yeah," Clancy said, and went outside to the car.

9:10 P.M. A uniformed policeman was stationed at the uptown side of the 86th Street IRT station, shunting people away from the entrance. "Hi, Lieutenant," he said.

Clancy grunted, pushing past. He trotted down the steps. Another uniformed officer was supporting the motorman, who looked white and shaken. A third held the crowd from the paralyzed train away from the mess below the platform.

"I couldn't help it," the motorman said to Clancy in a voice bordering on hysteria. "Honest to God! I was coming into the station normal like, slowing down, when he jumped right in front of me. I couldn't stop or nothing!"

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"All right, all right," Clancy said irritably. He hated hysterics. "Nobody figures you ran up on the platform after him." He turned to the patrolman. "Better get him home." He swung his head around. "Anybody else see this thing?"

"I did, I did!" It was a youngster in his teens, bursting with his news. "I was right up in front—I seen it all!"

"Anybody near him?" Clancy asked. "Any chance he was pushed?"

"Naw." The boy discounted this with a derisive tone born of nervousness. "He was all alone, standing like he was waiting for the train to stop to get on. Then all of a sudden, just like that, he *jumps* off! Nearly in my face!"

"Notice anybody else on the platform?"

The boy hesitated, torn between embellishment and fact. "I think they was a guy by the wash room reading a paper," he said doubtfully. "I think. I ain't sure."

"Okay, son." Clancy turned back to the patrolman. "How about the guy in the change booth?"

The patrolman shook his head. "Wrong angle. Couldn't see a thing."

"Get their names and addresses," Clancy said. "Do you have a make on him yet?"

"We ain't touched him, Lieutenant."

"So let's touch him," Clancy said. He went over to the cop at the edge of the platform and looked at his badge. "All right, 837. Down there and toss me up his papers."

"Hadn't we ought to wait for the medics, Lieutenant?"

"For what?" Clancy said sourly. "Let's get down there, son."

The young patrolman looked over the edge and gulped. "How about the third rail, Lieutenant?"

"So don't be a butterfingers." Clancy knew the current had been cut between 72nd and 96th on the uptown side as soon as the accident was reported, but he did not believe in coddling recruits. The cop lowered himself gingerly over the edge, eyeing the third rail as if it might slip out of position and lunge at him. He snared a wallet from the inside pocket of the mangled jacket and scrambled back to the platform.

"Medal of Honor," Clancy muttered ambiguously. He opened the wallet and a folded paper fell to the platform. He picked it up and carried it to the change booth for light. Thrusting it through the grill, he stared at the document and attached photograph in amazement.

"Well, well, well!" he said softly. "What do you know? Caper Kelly as I live and breathe!"

"Did you say something, sir?" asked the changer.

"No," Clancy said, shoving the papers and wallet into his overcoat pocket. Two white-jacketed youngsters came bounding down the

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steps, dragging a stretcher behind them.

"Where is he?" one asked.

"Down on the tracks," Clancy said, jerking his thumb. "Try to make it quick. There must be trains piled up all the way down to the Battery."

"Roger-dodger," said the other. "We'll have him out of there in a jiffy."

"Good," Clancy said, and trotted up the stairs.

9:40 P.M. Swinging through the precinct doors, Clancy paused at the door of the squad room.

"Stanton. Kaproski," he said. "In the office."

"One minute, Lieutenant," Stanton said. "If this last one's a spade . . ."

Clancy didn't even smile. "Now!"

"Your slightest whim," Stanton began, but Clancy was gone, shucking his overcoat.

In the office, which differed from the squad room only in that it had no lockers, Clancy sat staring at Stanton and Kaproski.

"For your information," he said, "Caper Kelly took a dive off the uptown platform of the 86 IRT about an hour ago."

"Caper Kelly?" Kaproski's chair straightened with a thump. "I don't believe it! The day Caper does the dutch, it'll be against somebody else!"

"Kelly, eh?" said Stanton. "Will money change hands tonight! The book on that *gonif* was eleven to three he eventually hangs."

"Not only that," added Kaproski indignantly, "but I bet Caper's never even been above 86 Street in his whole entire life! What would he be doing on an uptown platform?"

"That's right," Stanton said. "He was strictly a downtown Yankee Doodle boy. Afraid the Indians would scalp him up north in the wilds."

"Exactly," Clancy said softly. "It stinks. Caper's a cabbie, probably hasn't been in a subway for years. And let's assume that even a hackie might want out—does he do a dive? With all that sweet carbon monoxide on tap? Queer." He drummed the desk with his fingers. "Very queer. Stanton, within a block or two of the 86th Street station—his cab."

"What about it?"

"I want it. In the precinct garage as soon as possible." He dug through the papers again. "A owner-Yellow, license 277-566."

"You got the keys?"

"No. They'll frisk him down at the morgue. Take a master and a spider, or tow the thing—but get it here."

10:35 P.M. Clancy swung the door open and peered at the complicated dashboard. "They're making these things more like airplanes every day. How did she run?"

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"Like a dream. Brand-new, practically."

"Inside lights don't work, though," Kaproski said. "Somebody swiped the ashtray, too, looks like—on the back of the front seat. The arm ashtrays are here."

Clancy shut the front door and moved back to study the rear interior. There was a blank hole where the ashtray had been. He flicked the light switch, but nothing happened.

"Anything in the glove compartment?"

"Registration. Some gook to clean the windshield. Usual junk."

Clancy clicked the light switch again. "Queer the lights don't work in a new car."

"They don't build them to last nowadays," Kaproski said disgustedly. "Build them to sell."

"Yeah," Clancy said, flicking the switch thoughtfully. "Well, lock her up. Maybe we'll have the lab boys check her over in the morning."

"For what, Lieutenant?"

"For luck," Clancy said. "Let's go back to the office."

They trooped back and reseated themselves. Clancy picked up a pencil and began twiddling it.

"Where did Caper live, do you know?"

"We ought to have it on the book," Kaproski said. "We drug him in here often enough." He went out to the sergeant's desk and returned in a minute. "1016 Central Park West," he said, reading from a slip. "Apartment nine-oh-eight."

"Pretty snazzy pad for a hackie," Stanton said.

"I don't know about that," Kaproski said. "They do all right. I catch one up to my sister's in the Bronx last week and the meter goes over four bucks by the time we get there."

"Yeah," Clancy said. "Well, let's go over and see how the other half lives. Or lived."

11:10 P.M. Clancy slipped the snap-latch free with a thin piece of celluloid and reached inside to turn on the light. They stood in the living room looking about.

"Not bad for a hackie," Stanton said.

"Yeah," Clancy said. "Well, let's go. Let's take the place apart."

"What are we looking for, Lieutenant?" Kaproski asked.

"How the hell should I know? Stanton, you take the bedroom. Kaproski, you take the kitchen and hall. Anything isn't normal, yell."

Clancy was poking through the books and records that filled the low shelves of the living room when Stanton came back in. He was carrying a small camera.

"Never see one like this," he said. "Looks like it's all lens'."

"Foreign," Clancy said, eyeing it with interest.

Kaproski called in. "Hey, Lieutenant. The bathroom's locked."

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Clancy came swiftly, slipping the camera into his pocket. "Anyone inside?"

"I don't think so. The light's out."

Clancy rapped on the door. "This is the police," he said clearly. "If there's anyone in there, open the door and don't get cute!"

There was silence. Clancy slipped a key from his pocket into the lock and swung the door open. The room was empty. He turned the light on and looked around.

"I know what that stuff is," Kaproski said, indicating the equipment mounted on a board stretched over the tub. "That's for making pictures. They call it a darkroom."

"Yeah," Clancy said. "You take the living room. I'll take this."

He opened the medicine chest and peered inside. He looked under the equipment into an empty tub, lifted the toilet seat and set it back down, and then turned the clothes hamper upside down, dumping the dirty clothes onto the floor, setting the empty hamper back on its feet. The hamper seemed taller from the outside than it did from the inside, so he reached down and pried up the wicker floor. He took a package of photographs that lay there, studying them carefully before placing them in his pocket.

"Okay, boys," he said, coming out and closing the door behind him. "Stanton, you come back to the precinct with me. Kaproski, you stay here." He thought a moment. "No lights, no radio. Real quiet like."

"Why?" Kaproski asked.

"For a very good reason," Clancy said. "Because I tell you to. If anybody shows, hold him and call me at the precinct. If I want you, I'll call." He went over and copied the number of the telephone. "Two rings and I'll hang up and call back. If the phone rings any other way, don't answer it. And don't make any noise."

"Can I smoke?"

"Do it quietly." He and Stanton went out, switching off the lights and closing the door. Kaproski groped his way to a chair resignedly.

11:30 P.M. "Hello, Jimmy? This is Lieutenant Clancy at the 52nd."

"Lieutenant? I thought you was at the 47th."

"Well, I'm not. I'm at the 52nd. Did your white-wings finally get back with that jumper over at the 86 IRT?"

"Hours ago, Lieutenant. We got him on ice."

"Anybody look at him yet?"

"At this hour? They'll make him tomorrow."

"Anybody turn up to claim him?"

"Not yet they ain't."

"Well, if anybody shows, don't let them even see him, let alone take him away."

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"What if they show with proper papers, Lieutenant?"

"At this hour of the night nobody's getting proper papers. Anyway, I don't care. Don't let him get away."

"By himself, he ain't going nowhere, Lieutenant."

"He isn't going with anyone else, either. Anyone up in the lab?"

"Doc Freeman come in about half an hour ago."

"Switch me up there, will you, Jimmy?"

"Right." He heard the clicking of the phone, the switchboard operator's murmur, and then the doctor's querulous voice on the wire.

"Hello?"

"Doc? This is Clancy over at the 52nd."

"Clancy? I thought you were at the 47th."

"Well, I'm not. I'm at the 52nd now." A touch of irritation entered Clancy's voice. "Listen, Doc—"

"The answer is no, Clancy."

"No what?"

"Just plain no. It's damn near midnight. I just came in to check on some reactions. I'm going home."

"It'll only take you a minute, Doc. There's a jumper down in the icebox I'd like you to take a look at."

"A jumper?"

"Yeah. Dove in front of an IRT train over at 86th Street.

There was a snort. "What do you want me to look for? Indian arrow poison? Or a double hernia?"

"Listen, Doc," Clancy said patiently. "I'm not asking for an autopsy. Just go down and look him over, is all. It won't take two minutes. It's on your way out."

"Clancy, you slay me." There was a pause and a sigh. "Well, okay."

"Thanks, Doc. Call me here at the precinct, will you?"

"This will cost you, Clancy. I warn you. Two doubles, pinch bottle."

"When hasn't it?" Clancy said sourly, and hung up.

12:15 A.M. Stanton came into the squad room where Clancy sat twiddling a pencil.

"Did the boys get off?"

"Yeah."

"I hope you told them not to make a Paramount production out of it," Clancy said.

"They'll go up the back way," Stanton said. "Kaproski's expecting them."

"Good. Let's go take another gander at that cab."

He slid into the back seat and sat staring at the empty hole that had housed the ashtray. "Very cute," he said to himself softly. He reached up, removed the protective cover from the ceiling light, and untwisted the bulb. He studied it, nodding his head. "Very cute indeed."

"There's a call for you, Lieutenant."

"Thanks." He climbed out, went

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into the office, and picked up the phone.

"Clancy? This is Doc Freeman. You're just lucky, that's all."

"What did you find, Doc?"

"Twenty-two short. Went in the back and hit a thin cigarette case he had in his shirt pocket. If it wasn't for that case it'd have gone through and nobody would ever have known." The Doc's voice was more respectful. "I'll do a complete in the morning."

"I don't think we'll need one," Clancy said, "but I'll let you know. Thanks, Doc."

"All in a day's work," the doctor said.

12:30 A.M. The phone rang twice, then fell silent. When it began to buzz again, Kaproski picked it up.

"Yeah?" he said guardedly.

"Clancy here. The boys arrive yet?"

"Yeah. Two are in here with me, and one in the kitchen."

"Good. He ought to show pretty soon. I imagine it took him a while to get the address. That phone there is unlisted. Don't take any chances—he's armed. Twenty-two, probably with a silencer."

Kaproski snorted. "You can't hit a barn with a silenced twenty-two."

"Tell that to Caper Kelly. Just don't take any chances, hear?"

"Right, Lieutenant. Who is he, anyways?"

"I haven't the faintest idea, but I'd guess it will be a little guy, gray hair, pencil mustache, well dressed. No chicken. Don't hurt him if you can help it. I feel sorry for the poor schnook. But don't take any chances, either."

"Right, Lieutenant."

2:55 A.M. They brought him in, handcuffed to Kaproski. The sergeant booked him and he was led away, dazed. Kaproski went into the squad room.

"Any trouble?" Clancy asked.

"Naw," Kaproski said. "He's strictly amachoor. He fumbled with the door so long I was afraid he wouldn't make it. I damn near opened it for him and invited him in. How did you tumble to him, Lieutenant?"

"I'm a detective," Clancy said. "It says so on the pay list."

"No, seriously," Stanton said.

"Well," Clancy said, "first, we all know Caper Kelly—he's strictly no good. We've had him in here a dozen times for everything except barratry. That cab deal was always a front—he was mixed up in a dozen rackets. Like Kaproski said, he may commit suicide, but never on himself. So the thing starts off looking funny." He picked up a pencil and began his twiddling.

"Next, we go over his cab and do a take on his apartment. I begin to get ideas. That hole where the ashtray goes, for example. Just the size to take a camera like the one

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you came up with in his apartment, Stanton. And the lights that don't work. They work, all right, but they aren't standard bulbs. They're infra-red. So it begins to add up."

He turned the pencil over in his fingers several times. "We find a darkroom in his apartment and I come across some pictures stashed away, showing a little gray-haired, rich-looking gentleman doing things with a floosie in the back seat of the cab. Bingo. No brains required. Caper had come up with a handy-dandy new racket. Only this time the sucker played rough.

"It isn't as hard as you might think. A twenty-two in a guy's back when he's standing on the platform edge, and whoops, there goes another one. The noise a train makes would cover the shot, and silenced you could even do it in a crowd. And who's going to know if he fell or jumped? I'll bet they haven't done a PM on a jumper in twenty years."

"But how did he ever get Caper down in the subway in the first place?" Stanton asked.

"A subway isn't a bad place to arrange a meet. Nobody pays any attention to anybody else down there. He probably told Caper he would come uptown on a local about 8:30, waited outside until Caper goes down, and then follows him behind a newspaper. It was his big mistake, of course. If we find Caper knocked off in traffic, the only thing we would have done is go around the corner to the bar and drink a toast."

"Yeah," Kaproski said. "But how did you know the pictures you found was of this self-same guy?"

"Caper was no dope," Clancy said patiently. "He was an old hand. It's only in the movies that they keep bleeding the sucker with the same bait. They paid off and Caper delivered. The fact that this character's pictures were still around seemed to indicate that maybe he hadn't been paid off yet."

"But how did you know the guy would come to Caper's place?"

"Well, it wouldn't make any sense if he didn't," Clancy said reasonably. "What's the point of knocking Caper off and then letting somebody else find the pictures?"

There was a moment's silence. Clancy reached over for a Report Form and began sliding it into the typewriter.

"Want me to type it up for you, Lieutenant?" Stanton said. "You could dictate it."

"No, that's all right," Clancy said. "I'll take it."

Kaproski cleared his throat in an embarrassed manner. "Well, anyway, Lieutenant," he said. "It was a mighty fine job you done."

"It sure was, Lieutenant," Stanton said admiringly.

Clancy looked up from the typewriter, studying the two men. For the first time that week he smiled. "All part of the service of the

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52nd," he said, and winked at them in friendliness.

He stood up, swiveling the chair toward Stanton.

"Sure you can type it up," he said. "Probably do a better job than I could do anyway."

EDITORS' NOTE: *The second police investigation from the Case Book of the 52nd Precinct will appear next month.*

Don't miss it—topical, authentic, fascinating—"Clancy and the Paper Clue."

FABLES OF FRAUDWAY

A "tale out of night school" by the famous Broadway columnist, television editor, and TV star . . .

BLINKY'S BONER

by HY GARDNER

CONVICT NUMBER 32146, WHOM we'll call Blinky for short, was only recently taken from the mental ward of a prison and assigned a regular cell. It all dates back to the reason for his incarceration.

Blinky was known as the "Grandpa Moses" of counterfeiters. He was so meticulous in copying a bill that it took the eagle eye of a trained professional to detect his funny money from the real.

McCoy.

For many months Blinky worked on what he thought was a foolproof set of engravings for a $10 bill. His chore completed, he wrinkled his work of art, compared it with the original through a powerful magnifying glass, and decided to test-pass it before going into volume production.

Within two hours Blinky was arrested.

"I defy you," he raged at the Treasury agent, placing both the original and the duplicate bill side by side, "to tell me the difference between these two ten-spots."

"There is no difference, Blinky," the T-man agreed, "and that's the trouble. Seems you made only one mistake. You copied your counterfeit *from a counterfeit!*"

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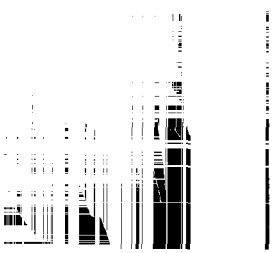

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